

THE MAGAZINE OF



Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE 1951

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Old Man Henderson
The Threepenny-piece
Bargain from Brunswick
The Extreme Airiness of Duton Lang
Android
A Story at Bedtime
The Glass of Supreme Moments
The Boy Next Door

KRIS NEVILLE
JAMES STEPHENS
JOHN WYNDHAM
PERCIVAL WILDE
C. H. LIDDELL
DOROTHY K. HAYNES
BARRY PAIN
CHAD OLIVER

A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction, new and old

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 2, No. 3

JUNE, 1951

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Occasionally a story is so rich, so human, so moving that it seems impossible and even unnecessary to write an introduction to it. We have long considered Kris Neville one of the outstanding talents among the younger writers of science fiction; we've long respected him particularly for his understanding that science fiction is fiction, and that fiction set in whatever era must essentially deal with people. We feel that Old Man Henderson — set around 2025 A.D., but timeless in its bitter study of the relation of the very young and the very old — is probably the finest thing Neville has written to date. It's a story, we think, that you'll read and reread quite a few times; now go ahead, without further preamble, to the first of those readings.

Old Man Henderson

by KRIS NEVILLE

"JOEY, JOEY," Mrs. Mathews sighed in exasperation, "haven't I told you and told you *not* to bring that animal in this house?"

"Awww, Mom," Joey said for what was probably the hundredth time since his father had brought Jasper home, "he won't hurt anything."

"I said, 'No!' and I meant just what I said. He st — smells."

Joey ruffled the green feathers on Jasper's neck and waited for the next line in the routine which usually went, with minor variations, "You just wait until your father gets home, young man, and *then* you'll be sorry." Joey always thought it a tremendously ineffective approach, on her part, to the issue under consideration. His father wouldn't be home from Mars for another three months yet, and by that time, she would have forgiven — or at least forgotten.

Mrs. Mathews, however, refused to run to her usual form today; she merely lowered her eyebrows, pursed her lips, and glared at him.

Joey recognized the storm warning. "I think Jasper smells nice and perfumy," he said soulfully.

Jasper squirmed around in Joey's arms until he could look up at Mrs. Mathews with his big, bright, intelligent eyes, which were, at the moment, mildly reproachful. In all his life, they seemed to remind her, he had never intended harm; and all he ever asked were a few kind words.

Mrs. Mathews bolstered her relenting will. "You take him out of here this instant!" she said.

Joey backed toward the door. "Can I play in the yard some more, then?"

Mrs. Mathews hid her enthusiasm for the idea behind sullen lips. "Well," she said, putting all the indecision she could muster into the syllable, "*well* . . . all right. For a little while longer. Then I want you to take a loaf of bread over to Old Man Henderson."

Joey flinched. "Awww, Mom," he whined. He did not like Old Man Henderson. To begin with, Old Man Henderson really *was* old. Joey suspected he was half as old as time itself. Over a hundred. In addition —

"I don't see," he said in his best party voice, trying to keep from going too far with the overt expression of his resentment, "why you have to bake bread anyway. No one *else* ever does."

Mrs. Mathews had been through this before; every time she wanted to send bread over to Old Man Henderson, in fact. She replied, in a very even voice, "I *like* homemade bread."

Joey debated a "Well, I don't" — which wasn't strictly true — with himself, and wisely decided against it.

"Now take Jasper out of here, and let's have no more arguments."

"Yes, Mother," Joey said.

When Mrs. Mathews called Joey, an hour and a half later, the bread was fresh from the oven. There were six, sweet-smelling, golden-brown loaves of it. The melted butter she had rubbed in made them glisten deliciously.

"Go wash your hands," she directed.

After he had left the room, she crossed to the cupboard, removed a section of wax paper and wrapped the largest of the loaves tightly in it. Even through the paper it felt delightfully warm in her hands. When you're as old as Old Man Henderson, she told herself, the warm center of the bread, dripping with butter, ought to taste very good to you. This loaf she put in a *plasta-bag*.

"Hurry, Joey," she called.

"I'm coming, I'm *coming*!"

Shortly he came.

"Here. I want you to take this now, and hurry, so he can get it before it gets cold."

She always made a special point of that: to see that she sent out his loaf just as soon as the bread came out of the oven.

"Now hurry," she admonished again.

It was no more than right, she told herself, that we do little things for poor Old Man Henderson once in a while. After all, it wasn't as if it were charity (which she vaguely disapproved of) because he *did* have the government pension; it was just to show that they really hadn't forgotten him.

"Can Jasper go with me?"

"Now, Joey. . . ."

"Aw, gee. *Please.*"

"Well, I don't know," she said indecisively. Old Man Henderson was so old, she reflected, that he probably wouldn't notice the odor; and some people really didn't mind it at all.

Joey shifted his feet. "He won't mind," he encouraged. He wanted to add, "The way Old Man Henderson smells is a hundred times worse than Jasper."

"All right," Mrs. Mathews agreed slowly. "And hurry, now."

At the door, Joey turned. "Mother —? If he wants me to stay a little while, may I?"

"Why — why," she said, "I mean, of course you may. I think it would be very nice if you'd stay and talk to him a little while; I'm sure he'd like for you to."

There! Mrs. Mathews reflected, that proved it — what she'd always said — if you raise a child properly (although, at times he is bound to be exasperating beyond all measure, and careless, and inconsiderate, and thoughtless), he is sure to do the proper thing when he has the chance.

And with adults, too, it was the same: wanting to do the proper thing. Of course you would *expect* adults to stop and visit with Old Man Henderson once in a while — it was their social duty; but for Joey — well, it was very sweet of him to want to give up part of his afternoon to listen to The Story again.

The Story was a standard — she guessed you'd say almost a standard *joke* — of the neighborhood. If you hadn't heard it at least ten times, so the saying went, you'd never met Old Man Henderson. "Here comes The Story down the street," they would say; and you knew immediately whom they meant. Although she, personally, would never *say* anything like that, she always found Old Man Henderson extremely tedious. But she suspected some of the others (who talked the loudest) really *liked*, down deep, to go over once in a while to hear The Story again.

She smiled at her son. "But be sure to come back home in time for supper." She paused a fraction of a second and then added, "And Joey — be a nice boy and remember, he's an old man, so don't tire him out."

"I'll remember," Joey promised.

As soon as he stepped out into the yard (letting the door slam after him), he called to his pet.

"Here, Jasper, here, boy!"

Jasper was lying in the hot sunlight, his head tucked under one of his stubby wings. When he heard Joey's voice, he peered out sleepily and said, "Kweect?"

"You want to come with me?" Joey asked.

Jasper appeared to consider the question; after a moment, he shuffled to his

feet and flapped his wings. "Kweet-weet," he said. He came at an awkward run.

"Well, let's go, then."

It took Joey better than two hours to get to Old Man Henderson's.

The house was set well back from the street, and it had a broad, well kept lawn with three islands of blooming flowers inset against the greenness of the grass.

Joey could remember how mad his father had been when, last Halloween, some of the neighborhood boys had littered it with little scraps of paper and pulled up all of the flowers. It had taken Old Man Henderson nearly all day just to get the paper picked up. His father had said to Joey, "If a son of mine did a trick like that, I'd see he was whipped until he couldn't sit down." And when his father discovered that Joey had helped to do it — Every time Joey thought about that, his bottom side prickled with the memory. And he blamed, not very logically, but quite emphatically, Old Man Henderson.

Joey stood on the porch for a long moment wondering if it would be safe not to knock at all, but instead, throw the bread away somewhere, and tell his mother he had delivered it. She would ask, "And how did he like the bread?" and he could reply, "Oh, he said to tell you that boughten bread couldn't come anywhere near yours." But Joey was a little afraid to risk a lie, so he knocked at the door.

After scarcely a second, Old Man Henderson called, "Come in," in his reedy voice.

Reluctantly, Joey opened the door and entered.

The room was dim — or perhaps it just seemed dim to Joey, coming in fresh from the hot sunlight — and it smelled, as he knew it would, of the dry, sweet-acrid odor of age, an odor somewhat like that of a bedroom, early in the morning.

Old Man Henderson blinked. "Ah-ah," he said. "Come in, boy, and set a while." He tried to keep his voice casual to keep from betraying the fact that he had been sitting there all afternoon hoping one of his young friends would drop by to talk to him.

"I've brought you some fresh bread," Joey replied noncommittally.

"Ah-ah," Old Man Henderson said. "Then you must be the Mathews boy." He had so many young friends that he sometimes confused their faces. There was the Jenkins lad, now, that looked a lot like this one.

"Well, well," he said, "so you've brought me some fresh bread, eh?"

"Yes."

"Ah-ah. Well, now, that's sure nice of you." His eyes showed sparkle. "Your mother makes fine bread. None better. Boughten bread can't come

anywhere near hers — Now you be sure to tell her I said that, will you?" Joey grunted.

"You want to bet something, boy? I'll bet that she just now finished baking that bread, and she sent a loaf over to me the very first thing." He leaned forward. "Your mother's a fine woman. Yes, she sure is a fine woman and thoughtful. You ought to be proud to have a mother like that. Every time she bakes, she sends me a loaf while it's still nice and hot, because she knows I sure do like it then."

Joey stared hard at the old man. "It's not hot this time," he said. "It's cold."

"Oh," Old Man Henderson said, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Yes, she forgot all about it until it was already cold," Joey said.

Old Man Henderson moved his jaw twice, blinked his eyes, and said, "I know, boy. I know. . . . But don't you worry none about that. It'll taste just as good anyway, and I'll like it just the same." He stood up. "Here. Give it to me, and I'll put it in the kitchen, there, for supper."

He took the loaf of bread and shuffled out of the room.

Joey wanted to leave before he got back, but he knew he should stay at least a little while, in case his mother should remark, "I hope Joey didn't tire you out, being over here all afternoon the other day." If he left too quickly, Old Man Henderson would be sure to remember that.

When the old man came back, he was carrying a little plate of crisp cookies. They were Joey's favorite, the kind with the coconut on the top.

"Here," Old Man Henderson said. "Take these, now, and sit down, boy, over there. In the comfortable chair."

Joey took the cookies without saying anything and sat down.

Old Man Henderson sat down in another chair and studied Joey for a bit, trying to think of something to say; always, at first, words came hard to him, and it was difficult for him to keep conversation alive.

"How are things going with my little man?" he finally asked.

"Fine."

"Fine, eh? Well, well. . . ."

Old Man Henderson looked down at his feet and then looked up again, waiting for Joey to say something else. When it became apparent that Joey had no intention of saying anything, Old Man Henderson reopened the conversation.

"You know," he began, "when you came in just a minute ago, I was sitting here thinking. . . . I was remembering back years and years ago. Must have been '50, '51. Yes, '51, I believe: that was the year of the big earthquake in Missouri. Well, one time, and I wasn't much older than you, then, just a little tad. . . ." He didn't think Joey was listening very attentively. "Well," he finished lamely, "never mind about all that."

Old Man Henderson realized, dimly, that the long ago of his youth was not as real and vivid as yesterday's sunset except to himself, and that growing boys do not like to listen to an old man ramble about his childhood. What they like, he told himself, are adventure stories, tales of drama and excitement. He recalled how, in his own youth, he had listened spellbound to story after story of the Great Wars.

He peered at Joey.

Let's see, he reflected, have I told this lad? . . . He tried not to bore people with the story, not that it wasn't a tremendously exciting story, ideal to tell to children, just the kind they would love to hear time after time, but on general principles. Nothing is worse, he frequently told himself, than an old man who harps continually on a single theme.

But after a moment's study, he was sure that he had never told this boy. Still, he didn't want to rush things. He would wait for a point at which the story would fall naturally into the conversation so that it wouldn't seem he was trying to *force* it on the boy.

For the first time (his eyes were not as good as they once were) Old Man Henderson noticed the strange animal that had entered with Joey. Less out of curiosity (of late he had ceased to care very much about the strange new things in the outside world) and more as a topic for conversation, he said, "Well, ah-ah. . . . And what's that you've got there?"

"Huh? Oh. Just Jasper."

"Jasper, eh? Well, well."

Joey had finished the cookies — he ate very fast — and now he felt more expansive. "Yes, Daddy brought him back from Venus." Joey scratched Jasper's head. "He's very intelligent and affectionate. And an ideal pet for children." Then he added, emphatically, as if Old Man Henderson had disagreed, "Daddy says so!"

"Why-why, now, that's fine. That's mighty fine. Well, well. . . . Come here, Jasper."

Jasper peered up at Joey as if for permission, and then scampered across the room.

Absently, Old Man Henderson reached down and ruffled Jasper's feathers. "I've sure never seen anything like this one."

Jasper hopped into his lap.

"My!" he said, beginning, for the first time, to take other than a conversational interest in the creature, for he always had a soft spot for affectionate animals. "Well, well. How do you like Old Mr. Henderson?"

Jasper nuzzled his hand and then looked up to study his face for a long moment. "Kweeet," he said. He liked Old Mr. Henderson well enough.

"You should be very nice to him," the old man said.

"I am," Joey answered. "Except once in a while. When he's mean."

"Ah-ah, yes," Old Man Henderson said.

Jasper had been following the conversation with his eyes, and now, in the silence, he looked across at Joey.

At length the old man said, "Ah-ah," half to himself. "Hummm. Well. Venus, you say?"

"Yes," Joey agreed. "We have to import food, and that's very expensive, but Daddy says it's worth it if *I* like him."

"Ah-ah. Seems to me I remember reading about them — whatever-you-call-'ems — now that I come to think of it."

Joey narrowed his eyes. Just last week his mother had said, "It's a pity Old Man Henderson's too old to read, any more, with so many exciting things happening every day, things he's always dreamed of seeing happen."

"All right, then," Joey demanded, deleting an "if *you* know so much" at the last moment, "how do Kweets manage to live on Earth, where the air's so different?"

Old Man Henderson opened and shut his mouth. He was suddenly confused. He tried to remember about that article — it *was* just the other day when he was reading it, wasn't it? — but he could not. "Why-why," he said. "Ahhh — ahhhhhh —"

"See there! You don't *know*!" Joey said triumphantly.

Old Man Henderson had been looking at the boy. Now he looked away. He studied the back of his heavy, veined hand as it glided over Jasper's soft, green feathers; there was a puzzled, half-frightened look on his face.

"So your Daddy gave him to you, eh?" he said at last, and his voice was unsteady. "And where is your Daddy now?"

Joey's voice started very soft and grew loud and harsh. "He's on Mars, doing engineering on the new Dome. I'll bet I've told you that a hundred times!"

Old Man Henderson blinked twice as if someone had slapped him almost hard enough to bring tears. "Of course, of course," he said hastily. "I remember, now. Mars, you say. I . . . I . . . I . . . ah-ah. . . . Mars? . . . Hummm."

He rubbed his withered hand along his leg.

"You know," he said, "when I was twenty years old, there hadn't ever been a man to the Moon. No, sir, not one, would you believe it?" Already, he could feel his confidence return. He had told the story quite a few times in the last fifty, seventy-five years. And he knew, too, that this young one would be sure to want to hear it, and that would make everything all right. "A couple of people had *tried*, but nobody ever made it."

"Well, well," Joey said.

No one had addressed him in that tone for years and years; people were al-

ways nice to him, and listened so politely. Now he could not quite understand it. He looked down at Jasper for reassurance.

"Ah-ah, yes. There hadn't been a single man to the Moon. . . . Well," he said, "you see that silver and gold plaque over the mantel, there?"

Joey did not turn to see.

But Old Man Henderson fell to studying it; and his eyes grew bright with the long ago and far away; for a moment, he was silent with the memory. Idly, one of his hands stroked Jasper's sleek feathers.

"Do you know who gave that to me?" he asked.

The question was rhetorical. It was merely a dramatic part of the oft told Story, and it had a contextual rather than an immediate meaning.

"Yes," Joey said, and his voice was a lethal whisper. "The President of the United States gave it to you."

Slowly, Old Man Henderson's mind drifted back to the room. That had been his sentence, and it sounded harsh to hear it coming from young lips, in a voice twisting all the glory of it into ashes. He could scarcely believe that he had heard correctly.

"Yes, yes, that's right," he heard his voice tell the boy, and it sounded weary and dry with disappointment.

"And I'll tell you *why* you got it," Joey said loudly. There was a queer excitement alive and throbbing in his body. He knew that the old man sitting before him was helpless before his words. He knew, also, that the old man would never protest to his mother. Not about this. It made him feel very big to be in a position to hurt Old Man Henderson without danger to himself.

"You got it because you were the first man to go to the Moon!"

Old Man Henderson felt ice form somewhere below his heart. He quit petting the Kweet and sat unseeing, listening, in spite of himself, to his own words come twisting back at him in a cruel burlesque.

"I've heard that story I'll bet a hundred times. Now let me tell *you* about it. How it felt when you first saw the long steel ship —" Joey began to mimic the reedy voice of Old Man Henderson — "'glistening in the New Mexican sunlight.'"

Old Man Henderson gestured weakly and wanted to ask the boy, please, to stop. Joey did not give him the chance.

"And how it felt when you took off, gravity pushing you back in your seat. And how it felt when you first saw the Moon right there almost under your feet. . . . 'It felt funny, and my heart seemed to get bigger and bigger until I wanted to cry.'"

"And the celebration they gave you when you got back, and how the President gave you that — that *thing* up there with his own two hands, and how he said —"

"Please, please. I meant no harm."

Joey had stopped for breath. He was almost incoherent with excitement.

"And how you went a second time again. And how you had Faith. . . ."
Again his voice went to the upper register. "I always had faith, even when I was a little tyke, that Man couldn't be kept on Earth, that he was bound for the Moon, and then the planets, and then the stars. I always had *faith!*"

"Nobody wants to listen to your silly old story any more. Can't you see that! *Nobody wants to listen!* You've told it and told it until we're all sick and tired of hearing it!"

"When they see you coming down the street, they say, 'Here comes Old Man Henderson and his *Story*,' and they *laugh* at you when your back's turned!"

Joey had to stop for breath.

Old Man Henderson made no sound.

In his excitement, Joey waved his arms wildly. He upset the cookie dish and it shattered on the floor. Joey began again, and it was almost a scream.

"You don't seem to realize that nobody wants to hear about how you went to the Moon. Why, *anybody* could go to the *Moon!* I've been there twice and Daddy and Mommy both have been to Venus and Daddy's on Mars putting up a Dome right now so people can live on it and it's going to be a bigger Dome than the one on Venus, and all you talk about is how you went to the *Moon!*"

Joey was crying now.

"And you don't even know what a Kweet is, and you don't even know *nothing* about what we're doing!"

He turned and ran to the door. There, he stopped and looked back. He saw Old Man Henderson sitting very still, not saying anything, and suddenly he didn't feel glad any more.

"Come on, Jasper," he screamed. "I'm getting out of here, away from that crazy old man!"

Jasper looked at Joey and said nothing. Then he turned his mute eyes to Old Man Henderson. He did not move.

For a moment, Joey did not know what to do; he began to feel the first rustlings of fear inside of his mind. He turned and slammed the door behind him and began to run.

Jasper lay quietly in Old Man Henderson's lap. He looked up into the old face, the old face of loose folds of dry skin, but the face with the astonishingly bright eyes that brimmed with tears.

After a long time, Old Man Henderson put Jasper on the carpet, stood up, and walked to Joey's chair. He got down on his knees and began to pick up pieces of the broken cookie dish.

Jasper waddled over. "Kweet?" he asked, very, very softly.

1950 was a cruel year for readers of fantasy and science fiction, marked by the deaths of authors as diverse (yet each in his way distinguished) as Edgar Rice Burroughs, Erle Cox, Robert Hichens, George Orwell, George Bernard Shaw and Olaf Stapledon. But perhaps no other obit of the year touched the heart quite so closely as that of James Stephens, the clown-faced little Irishman whose poetry, short stories and novels (in particular the almost certainly immortal *THE CROCK OF GOLD*) express a fusion of absurdity and tenderness, low comedy and high beauty, too truly poetic to sully with the label of whimsy — a blend at once deeply Irish and peculiarly Stephens' own. Your Irish editors, feeling that an Irish genius should be waked, not with Saxon mourning and propriety, but with loud joy and laughter, are happy to revive this story from Stephens' *HERE ARE LADIES* (Macmillan, 1913). The comic treatment of the formalities of death and judgment is the theme of 75% of the worst stories immediately rejected from our desks — but now let Mr. Stephens show how magnificent a theme it may become in the hands of a master.

The Threepenny-Piece

by JAMES STEPHENS

WHEN BRIEN O'BRIEN DIED people said that it did not matter very much, because he would have died young in any case. He would have been hanged, or his head would have been split in two halves with a hatchet, or he would have tumbled down the cliff when he was drunk and been smashed into jelly. Something like that was due him, and everybody likes to see a man get what he deserves to get.

But, as ethical writs cease to run when a man is dead, the neighbours did not stay away from his wake. They came, and they said many mitigating things across the body with the bandaged jaws and the sly grin, and they reminded each other of this and that queer thing which he had done, for his memory was crusted over with stories of wild, laughable things, and other things which were wild but not laughable.

Meanwhile, he was dead, and one was at liberty to be a trifle sorry for him. Further, he belonged to the O'Brien nation, a stock to whom reverence was

*From the book, "Here Are Ladies," by James Stephens. Copyright, 1913,
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due. A stock not easily forgotten. The historic memory could reconstruct forgotten glories of station and battle, of terrible villainy and terrible saintliness, the pitiful, valourous, slow descent to the degradation which was not yet wholly victorious. A great stock! The O'Neills remembered it. The O'Tools and the MacSweenys had stories by the hundred of love and hate. The Burkes and the Geraldines and the new strangers had memories also.

His family was left in the poorest way, but they were used to that, for he had kept them as poor as he left them, or found them, for that matter. They had shaken hands with Charity so often that they no longer disliked the sallow-faced lady, and so certain small gifts, made by the neighbours, were accepted, not very thankfully but very readily. These gifts were almost always in kind. A few eggs. A bag of potatoes. A couple of twists of tea — such like.

One of the visitors, however, moved by an extraordinary dejection, slipped a silver threepenny-piece into the hand of Brien's little daughter, Sheila, aged four years, and later on she did not like to ask for it back again.

Little Sheila had been well trained by her father. She knew exactly what should be done with money, and so, when nobody was looking, she tip-toed to the coffin and slipped the threepenny-piece into Brien's hand. That hand had never refused money when it was alive; it did not reject it either when it was dead.

They buried him the next day.

He was called up for judgment the day after, and made his appearance with a miscellaneous crowd of wretches, and there he again received what was due to him. He was removed protesting and struggling to the place decreed.

"Down," said Rhadamanthus, pointing with his great hand, and down he went.

In the struggle he dropped the threepenny-piece, but he was so hustled and heated that he did not observe his loss. He went down, far down, out of sight, out of remembrance, to a howling black gulf with others of his unseen kind.

A young scraph, named Cuchulain, chancing to pass that way shortly afterwards, saw the threepenny-piece peeping brightly from the rocks, and he picked it up.

He looked at it in astonishment. He turned it over and over, this way and that way. Examined it at the stretch of his arm, and peered minutely at it from two inches' distance. . . .

"I have never in my life seen anything so beautifully wrought," said he, and, having stowed it in his pouch along with some other trinkets, he strolled homewards again through the massy gates.

It was not long until Brien discovered his loss, and suddenly, through the black region, his voice went mounting and brawling.

"I have been robbed," he yelled. "I have been robbed in heaven!"

Having begun to yell he did not stop. Sometimes he was simply angry and made a noise. Sometimes he became sarcastic and would send his query swirling upwards:

"Who stole the threepenny-bit?" he roared. He addressed the surrounding black space:

"Who stole the last threepenny-bit of a poor man?"

Again and again his voice pealed upwards. The pains of his habitation lost all their sting for him. His mind had nourishment, and the heat within him vanquished the fumes without. He had a grievance, a righteous cause; he was buoyed and strengthened, nothing could silence him. They tried ingenious devices, all kinds of complicated things, but he paid no heed, and the tormentors were in despair.

"I hate these sinners from the kingdom of Kerry," said the Chief Tormentor, and he sat moodily down on his own circular saw; and that worried him also, for he was clad only in a loincloth.

"I hate the entire Clan of the Gael," said he; "why cannot they send them somewhere else?" and then he started practising again upon Brien.

It was no use. Brien's query still blared upwards like the sound of a great trump itself. It wakened and rung the rocky caverns, screamed through fissure and funnel, and was battered and slung from pinnacle to crag and up again. Worse! His companions in doom became interested and took up the cry, until at last the uproar became so appalling that the Master himself could not stand it.

"I have not had a wink of sleep for three nights," said that harassed one, and he sent a special embassy to the powers.

Rhadamanthus was astonished when they arrived. His elbow was leaning on his vast knee, and his heavy head rested on a hand that was acres long, acres wide.

"What is all this about?" said he.

"The Master cannot go to sleep," said the spokesman of the embassy, and he grinned as he said it, for it sounded queer even to himself.

"It is not necessary that he should sleep," said Rhadamanthus. "I have never slept since time began, and I will never sleep until time is over. But the complaint is curious. What has troubled your master?"

"Hell is turned upside down and inside out," said the fiend. "The tormentors are weeping like little children. The principalities are squatting on their hunkers doing nothing. The orders are running here and there fighting each other. The styles are leaning against walls shrugging their shoulders, and the damned are shouting and laughing and have become callous to torment."

"It is not my business," said the judge.

"The sinners demand justice," said the spokesman.

"They've got it," said Rhadamanthus; "let them stew in it."

"They refuse to stew," replied the spokesman, wringing his hands.

Rhadamanthus sat up.

"It is an axiom in law," said he, "that however complicated an event may be, there can never be more than one person at the extreme bottom of it. Who is the person?"

"It is one Brien of the O'Brien nation, late of the kingdom of Kerry. A bad one! He got the maximum punishment a week ago."

For the first time in his life Rhadamanthus was disturbed. He scratched his head, and it was the first time he had ever done that either.

"You say he got the maximum," said Rhadamanthus; "then it's a fix! I have damned him forever, and better or worse than that cannot be done. It is none of my business," said he angrily, and he had the deputation removed by force.

But that did not ease the trouble. The contagion spread until ten million billions of voices were chanting in unison, and uncountable multitudes were listening between their pangs.

"Who stole the threepenny-bit? Who stole the threepenny-bit?"

That was still their cry. Heaven rang with it as well as hell. Space was filled with that rhythmic tumult. Chaos and empty Nox had a new discord added to their elemental throes. Another memorial was drafted below, showing that unless the missing coin was restored to its owner hell would have to close its doors. There was a veiled menace in the memorial also, for Clause 6 hinted that if hell was allowed to go by the board heaven might find itself in some jeopardy thereafter.

The document was dispatched and considered. In consequence a proclamation was sent through all the wards of Paradise, calling on whatever person, archangel, seraph, cherub, or acolyte, had found a threepenny-piece since mid-day of the tenth August then instant, that same person, archangel, seraph, cherub, or acolyte, should deliver the said threepenny-piece to Rhadamanthus at his Court, and should receive in return a free pardon and a receipt.

The coin was not delivered.

That young seraph, Cuchulain, walked about like a person who was strange to himself. He was not tormented: he was angry. He frowned, he cogitated and fumed. He drew one golden curl through his fingers until it was lank and drooping; save the end only, that was still a ripple of gold. He put the end in his mouth and strode moodily chewing it. And every day his feet turned in the same direction — down the long entrance boulevard, through the mighty gates, along the strip of carved slabs to that piled wilderness where Rhadamanthus sat monumentally.

Here delicately he went, sometimes with a hand outstretched to help his foothold, standing for a space to think ere he jumped to a farther rock, balanc-

ing himself for a moment ere he leaped again. So he would come to stand and stare gloomily upon the judge.

He would salute gravely, as was meet, and say, "God bless the work"; but Rhadamanthus never replied, save by a nod, for he was very busy.

Yet the judge did observe him, and would sometimes heave ponderous lids to where he stood, and so for a few seconds they regarded each other in an interval of that unceasing business.

Sometimes for a minute or two the young seraph Cuchulain would look from the judge to the judged as they crouched back or strained forward, the good and the bad all in the same tremble of fear, all unknowing which way their doom might lead. They did not look at each other. They looked at the judge high on his ebony throne, and they could not look away from him. There were those who knew, guessed clearly, their doom; abashed and flaccid they sat, quaking. There were some who were uncertain — rabbit-eyed these, not less quaking than the others, biting at their knuckles as they peeped upwards. There were those hopeful, yet searching fearfully backwards in the wilderness of memory, chasing and weighing their sins; and these last, even when their bliss was sealed and their steps set on an easy path, went faltering, not daring to look around again, their ears strained to catch a "Halt, miscreant! This other is your way!"

So, day by day, he went to stand near the judge; and one day Rhadamanthus, looking on him more intently, lifted his great hand and pointed.

"Go you among those to be judged," said he.

For Rhadamanthus knew. It was his business to look deep into the heart and the mind, to fish for secrets in the pools of being.

And the young seraph Cuchulain, still rolling his golden curl between his lips, went obediently forward and set down his nodding plumes between two who whimpered and stared and quaked.

When his turn came, Rhadamanthus eyed him intently for a long time.

"Well!" said Rhadamanthus.

The young seraph Cuchulain blew the curl of gold away from his mouth.

"Findings are keepings," said he loudly, and he closed his mouth and stared very impertinently at the judge.

"It is to be given up," said the judge.

"Let them come and take it from me," said the seraph Cuchulain. And suddenly (for these things are at the will of spirits) around his head the lightnings span, and his hands were on the necks of thunders.

For the second time in his life Rhadamanthus was disturbed; again he scratched his head.

"It's a fix," said he moodily. But in a moment he called to those whose duty it was.

"Take him to this side," he roared.

And they advanced. But the seraph Cuchulain swung to meet them, and his golden hair blazed and shrieked; and the thunders rolled at his feet, and about him a bright network that hissed and stung — and those who advanced turned haltingly backwards and ran screaming.

"It's a fix," said Rhadamanthus; and for a little time he stared menacingly at the seraph Cuchulain.

But only for a little time. Suddenly he put his hands on the rests of his throne and heaved upwards his terrific bulk. Never before had Rhadamanthus stood from his ordained chair. He strode mightily forward and in an instant had quelled that rebel. The thunders and lightnings were but moonbeams and dew on that stony carcass. He seized the seraph Cuchulain, lifted him to his breast as one lifts a sparrow, and tramped back with him.

"Fetch me that other," said he sternly, and he sat down.

Those whose duty it was sped swiftly downwards to find Brien of the O'Brien nation; and while they were gone, all in vain the seraph Cuchulain crushed flamey barbs against that bosom of doom. Now, indeed, his golden locks were drooping and his plumes were broken and tossed; but his fierce eyes still glared courageously against the nipple of Rhadamanthus.

Soon they brought Brien. He was a sight of woe — howling, naked as a tree in winter, black as a tarred wall, carved and gashed, tattered in all but his throat, wherewith, until one's ears rebelled, he bawled his one demand.

But the sudden light struck him to a wondering silence, and the sight of the judge holding the seraph Cuchulain like a limp flower to his breast held him gaping.

"Bring him here," said Rhadamanthus, and they brought him to the steps of the throne.

"You have lost a medal!" said Rhadamanthus. "This one has it."

Brien looked straightly at the seraph Cuchulain.

Rhadamanthus stood again, whirled his arm in an enormous arc, jerked, and let go, and the seraph Cuchulain went swirling through space like a slung stone.

"Go after him, Kerryman," said Rhadamanthus, stooping; and he seized Brien by the leg, whirled him wide and out and far; dizzy, dizzy as a swooping comet, and down, and down, and down.

Rhadamanthus seated himself. He motioned with his hand . . .

"Next," said he coldly.

Down went the seraph Cuchulain, swirling in wide tumbles, scarcely visible for quickness. Sometimes, with outstretched hands, he was a cross that dropped plumb. Anon, head urgently downwards, he dived steeply. Again, like a living hoop, head and heels together, he spun giddily. Blind, deaf, dumb, breathless

mindless; and behind him Brien of the O'Brien nation came pelting and whizzing.

What of that journey! Who could give it words? Of the suns that appeared and disappeared like winking eyes. Comets that shone for an instant, went black and vanished. Moons that came and stood, and were gone. And around all, including all boundless space, boundless silence; the black, unmoving void — the deep, unending quietude, through which they fell with Saturn and Orion, and mildly-smiling Venus, and the fair, stark-naked moon and the decent earth wreathed in pearl and blue. From afar she appeared, the quiet one, all lonely in the void. As sudden as a fair face in a crowded street. Beautiful as the sound of falling waters. Beautiful as the sound of music in a silence. Like a white sail on a windy sea. Like a green tree in a solitary place. Chaste and wonderful she was. Flying afar. Flying aloft like a joyous bird when the morning breaks on the darkness and he shrills sweet tidings. She soared and sang. Gently she sang to timid pipes and flutes of tender straw and murmuring, distant string. A song that grew and swelled, gathering to a multitudinous, deep-thundered harmony, until the over-burdened ear failed before the appalling uproar of her ecstasy, and denounced her. No longer a star! No longer a bird! A plumed and horned fury! Gigantic, leaping and shrieking tempestuously, spouting whirlwinds of lightning, tearing gluttonously along her path, avid, rampant, howling with rage and terror she leaped, dreadfully she leaped and flew. . . .

Enough! They hit the earth — they were not smashed, there was that virtue in them. They hit the ground just outside the village of Donnybrook where the back road runs to the hills; and scarcely had they bumped twice when Brien of the O'Brien nation had the seraph Cuchulain by the throat.

"My threepenny-bit," he roared, with one fist up.

But the seraph Cuchulain only laughed.

"That!" said he. "Look at me, man. Your little medal dropped far beyond the rings of Saturn."

And Brien stood back looking at him.

He was as naked as Brien was. He was as naked as a stone, or an eel, or a pot, or a new-born babe. He was very naked.

So Brien of the O'Brien nation stode across the path and sat down by the side of a hedge.

"The first man that passes this way," said he, "will give me his clothes, or I'll strangle him."

The seraph Cuchulain walked over to him.

"I will take the clothes of the second man that passes," said he, and he sat down.

Once again we bring you the first published story of a new writer — a brief and compassionate sketch, with a startling variation on an old theme.

Love Story

by KAY ROGERS

EARLY MORNING, a cold, foggy September morning, was no time to talk of love. Especially to Liz. Old Liz. But Elizabeth did.

For Liz was haunted. Haunted cruelly by an invisible girl-ghost named Elizabeth. Liz imagined her lovely, dressed in white — Elizabeth is that kind of name, a blue-ribboned, brown-braid name. In white. Virginal.

Elizabeth's favorite time was the night-dregs before dawn brought such faint promise as even Liz might know. She came when the penny gin was dying and Liz was alone in a vacuum of quivering unreality. Elizabeth wanted, she threatened. Old Liz clung desperately to life, even her furtive, harried one.

She crouched hopelessly among the fusty blankets of her bed. Youth and beauty long gone, business was bad; she faced a day without gin and she shook pitifully as Elizabeth's cool dainty voice flayed her.

"This room," Elizabeth began. It was shadowed by the gas turned to less than half-flare, but obediently, Liz looked about it.

Dirt. Dainty Elizabeth! She liked whole, new things. Limp, ragged curtains over the never-opened window. The smell, which Liz didn't notice except by Elizabeth's prompting, of nasty dirt; dried sweatings and an indefinable something left by the mutual revulsions which the room had witnessed.

"Do you remember *my* room?"

Was there ever a clean, pretty room, fit for Elizabeth? A place where crisp, muslin curtains beckoned in the heather smell to join the dried lavender scent which lived inside — was there truly ever such a place?

"And me," Elizabeth said. "I had a laugh like the song of a bird. But the things you've made me see — did you think you could kill me, Liz?"

"And you couldn't," the girl asserted. "You're only a shadow of the night and this evil city. I'm as alive as you. But my beauty . . . and my foolish, beautiful dreams. . . ."

What did a young girl dream? Liz's own small wants were barriered by the futile misery of existence. Gin. Less fog. The hopeless wish for a real fur muff. A lucky evening with a silk-caped swell — drunken largesse. Better still, one

drunk enough to be robbed . . . God, even a farthing toward tomorrow's gin. . . . Dirty, narrow dreams. Like the room. Elizabeth's broken dreams were better than none and it was a sudden, bitter realization.

"Beautiful," Elizabeth was repeating. "But foolish. To think I dreamed that love was noble and pure. Pure. . . I"

Together, they saw the eyes, ruttish, leering. . . .

"Slimy!" Elizabeth shuddered. "If Mother knew. . . ."

"Don't speak of her!" Liz screamed. "A pure love you want, hey? Think I'm too old and not good enough for it, do you? I'll find it for you, my girl."

Elizabeth's cool mirth was a crystal knife.

"Love? You? From some old randy like yourself — love! Pah!"

And anger was no good, nor the vilest words. Elizabeth still talked like a bloody toff and forced Liz to it. There was nothing to do but jam the bonnet on the thinning, greasy hair and thrust arms into the shabby jacket.

Elizabeth touched the sprig of rosemary pinned to the jacket. Her gurgling laughter mocked the gray green leaves, the tiny blue blossoms. "Rosemary," she said. "For remembrance."

Hastily, Liz scrambled over the peeling bit of American cloth which covered the dresser. She located the packet of cachous tossed there contemptuously by a disgusted sailor; she sniffed them; they were still fresh. Slyly, she tucked them in her pocket and with a furtive sleeve buffed at her decaying teeth. Now she was girded to wrest a miracle from the city.

Outside, yellow fog drifted in crazy whorls like one of the bad dreams.

"And now?" Elizabeth mocked. By habit, Liz turned toward the darker streets. If Elizabeth remembered the bloody horror found in such a place two mornings ago, she gave no warning.

Instead, under a blue-lit window, she commanded brightly: "See old Zoraide's light! Remember the fortune she saw for you; you'd be famous, your name would be known abroad? How amusing!"

Liz sniffled miserably. Her fame! Everyone in the East End knew Long Liz; knew and laughed at the thought of her, a dirty, snickering laugh. She felt dimly Elizabeth wasn't playing fair, twitting pettily, when she was out in the weather, getting her what she wanted. She wavered to a halt.

"Listen, my girl," she admonished. "If there's a pure love in London, Liz will get it for you. Then I'll have peace. This way. This way."

Abruptly, she turned into an alley which led into a small court. Beyond was a faint, murky light and Liz scuffed over the cobbles faster toward its dim hope.

Her scuttering steps carried far ahead in the thickening, yellow fog. They reached the ears of a dark, manlike shape which waited. A woman? Alert, it flung up its head and listened. Closer . . . she was coming . . . closer. . . . Liz didn't see the shape until it loomed up before her, as things do in the fog.

At first, she saw only its man-shape and her mouth stretched in a tentative smile. Remembering suddenly, her fingers closed upon the packet of cachous.

But Elizabeth was laughing, in triumph and revenge, as she fled forever.

Liz understood, alone in the Whitechapel court, with the man-shape, whose name was Jack, and the pure, scarlet love for her in his eyes.

Those who wish to investigate the bare historical facts will find an account of the inquest on Elizabeth Stride, fifth victim of Jack the Ripper, on pp. 179-85 of Richard Barker's admirable THE FATAL CARESS (Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947).

To Our Readers

We have no letter column in F&SF, largely because 90% of your letters to us insist that we should devote the space to more stories; but please don't think this absence of a column means any lack of interest in mail from our readers.

We need your letters to help shape our policies in producing the magazine that will best please you; and to date you've been very helpful indeed, particularly in response to our query, two issues back, as to what we should do with the 10,000 words we've added to our content.

Frankly, you surprised us and somewhat changed our plans — we had expected a heavier demand for long novelets. In percentage form, the results are:

Shorts, only, no novelets.	40%
An occasional novelet, but only if of very high quality.	17%
A regular policy of a novelet in each issue.	20%
Serials.	7%
Anything the editors think best.	17%

The total impression from your letters seems best summed up by one from Georgia, which says: "I don't think you should have an editorial policy of any sort about story length. Just buy all the good ones that come in. . . ."

So that's what we'll try to do; and the issue you're now reading certainly offers variety: 13 stories ranging from a 15,000 word novelet to a one-page short-short. We hope you'll agree with us that each is a strong and highly individual specimen of its length. But whether you agree or disagree, let us know what you think.

We hope, from time to time, to make other reports like this on your opinions concerning editorial policy. Please remember that we're always eager to hear from you, at 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, California.

THE EDITORS

The English writer John Wyndham is chiefly known, under at least three names, for such science fiction as his recent hardcover novel THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS; but occasionally, bless him, he comes up with a delightful bit of pure fantasy — pleasingly absurd on the surface, at once warm and bitter beneath. Here is a modern sequel to one of the most moving of traditional tales — suggesting, possibly, the unlikely but entrancing collaboration of Stephen Vincent Benét with Helen Hokinson.

Bargain from Brunswick

by JOHN WYNDHAM

THE PARTLAND HOME is the big house on the left, about a hundred yards, maybe, beyond that sign that says:

WELCOME TO
PLEASANTGROVE
POP: 3,226

and the board beneath it which adds:

THE LIVEST LITTLE CITY
IN THIS OR ANY STATE
WATCH IT GROW

In the big Partland living room Mrs. Claybert was explaining:

"My dears, I *must* apologise. Only this morning I said to myself: 'Ethel, this time you're going to be on schedule.' That's just what I said. And now I've kept all you girls waiting again. Am I mortified! Something always happens. I'm interruption-prone, I guess. It was the mailman came, right as I was starting. He had a package from my boy, Jem. You know my Jem's over in Europe, occupying those Nazis. Of course I couldn't leave it that way. I just *had* to take a peek. And I was so thrilled when I saw what it was, I just had

to bring it right along with me. There, now, look, isn't that a cute present?"

Mrs. Claybert, with a conjuror's air, stripped the paper from the object she carried, and held it up. The ladies of the Pleasantgrove Cultural Club Musical Society, Recorder Section, gathered round, impressed. Among the modest instruments they were holding — and which they would have been playing by this time had Mrs. Claybert kept her schedule — it was a king. The whole length of its dark body was carved with an intricacy of vines and leaves in low relief. The sharpness of the pattern was softened as though by much handling. The polished wood, of darkest chestnut shade, gleamed like satin.

"Why, Ethel, that's real antique. Maybe a hundred years old — maybe even more," said Mrs. Muller. "Aren't you the lucky girl! I didn't know you'd a millionaire son. Must've set him back plenty."

"Oh, my Jem's a good boy. He'd never be a tightwad where his Mom was concerned," said Mrs. Claybert, a trifle smugly.

Mrs. Partland was somehow in the middle of the group when she was thought to be on the outside. It was a way Mrs. Partland had. She took the instrument from Mrs. Claybert's hands, and examined it.

"The workmanship's just elegant," she pronounced, though with an air of impugning any other quality it might possess. She slid her fingers over the smooth polished undulations. "Yes, it certainly was made by one of those old-time craftsmen. But," she added severely, "is the pitch right?"

"I wouldn't know," admitted Mrs. Claybert. "I didn't have time to try it. I simply said to myself: 'Ethel, the girls'll just *love* to see that,' and I brought it right along with me."

Mrs. Partland handed it back.

"We'd better find out before we begin. Barbara, will you give Mrs. Claybert the 'D'?" she directed.

Mrs. Cooper lifted her recorder, and obliged. It was a plaintive note.

Mrs. Claybert found the finger-holes, and raised the ivory mouthpiece of her resplendent instrument to her lips. She blew gently.

A silence fell on the room, and hung there a moment.

"Well, I guess it *is* 'D'," acknowledged Mrs. Muller. "But it's a very unusual tone, isn't it? It's more like — well, I don't know quite what it is like. But it certainly is a *very* remarkable tone indeed."

Mrs. Partland, satisfied on the technical side, moved over to the footstool which served her as a rostrum. Mrs. Claybert was still looking at her instrument with astonishment and admiration.

"You wouldn't expect it to sound like a modern one," she said. "I mean, we have machinery and things now. That must make a difference. I guess this is the way they all sounded in those olden times."

Mrs. Partland rapped with her baton.

"Girls!" she said, decisively, but for the moment she went unheard.

"You know," Mrs. Claybert was saying, in a visionary fashion, "you know, somehow I can just see one of those old strolling players using maybe this very instrument in one of those big mediaeval halls. There'd be great oak beams, and rushes on the floor, and —"

"Ladies!" commanded Mrs. Partland. Her arresting tone cut short Mrs. Claybert, and brought them all round facing her. She went on: "There's that little thing by Purcell that we played last time. If we start with that, it'll get our fingers limbered up nicely. Have you all got your sheets?"

The ladies disposed themselves, arranged their fingers on their recorders, and frowned at their parts. Mrs. Partland stood on her footstool, baton poised.

"Now, is everybody ready? Well, I'm afraid you'll just have to look over Mrs. Schultz's sheet, Mrs. Lubbock. Now. One — Two — Three . . ."

From the first breath it was clear that something was not well. One by one the others faltered and stopped, leaving Mrs. Claybert with a long, sweet note proceeding from her instrument, and an astonished look about her eyes. Mrs. Partland drew an admonitory breath, but before she could speak Mrs. Claybert's white fingers began to skip delicately on the dark wood. A tune, light, lilting, and lovely as a May morning danced through the room. Mrs. Claybert's comfortable body began to sway lissomely as she played. She posed one foot forward. The air was enchanting, irresistible. She began to dance. Lightly as a ballerina she crossed the room, and whisked beyond the door. After her swept and swayed the ladies of the Pleasantgrove Cultural Club, like nymphs upon a sward. . . .

At the crossroads the lights were against them. They stopped, and stood there, looking dazed. The cop was a man of notable self-control. All the same, his eyes were still bulging slightly as he came across. He approached Mrs. Claybert with a look somewhere between compassion and suspicion. The glance he gave her instrument was wholly suspicious, as if it might be some ornamental kind of nightstick.

"What would it be, lady? What goes on here?" he inquired.

Mrs. Claybert did not answer. Her eyes dwelt on him with the wondering look of one only half untranced. For a moment nobody else spoke, either. Mrs. Partland felt that it in some way devolved on her to clear things up.

"It's all right, Officer. We were just — well. Well, it was just a — a kind of — of — er — Corybantic fancy," she finished desperately.

The cop looked them over. His eyelids lowered in a slow blink, lifted again.

"I wouldn't know much about that," he admitted. "But, lady, if I was you, I'd go fancy it some place else."

"Yes," said Mrs. Partland, with unusual meekness. "Girls —" she began. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw Mrs. Claybert's hands raising her instrument once more. She made a quick snatch.

"Oh, no, you don't," she said. "Not again!"

Mr. Claybert examined the recorder. He peered at it this way and that under the light. He might have attempted to blow it had the mouthpiece not been removed to rest safely in Mrs. Claybert's handbag.

"Yes," he said, judiciously. "It certainly is old. But is it old enough —"

"How old would it have to be?" Mrs. Claybert asked.

"I can't say for sure — 'bout seven or eight hundred years, I guess."

"Well — maybe it is that."

"Uh-huh. Maybe. I wouldn't know what seven hundred years looks like anyway."

"If it *is* —" Mrs. Claybert began. But she cut off the remark, and lapsed into thought.

"You *can* find out," observed her husband, pointedly.

She made no response. Mr. Claybert laid the recorder down carefully on the table. The silence that ensued was broken only by the rhythm of his fingernails on the arm of his chair. His wife moved irritably.

"Harold, dear. Will you please to stop that drumming!"

Mr. Claybert obediently stopped, but though he controlled his fingers the rhythm went on in his mind. *Tum! Tum! Te-tutta, te-tutta, te-Tum!* He found that his foot was beginning to tap it. *Tum! Tum! Te-tutta, te-tutta, te-Tum!* He checked that, too, but it still went on inside him. Soon his head was nodding to it and his lips were framing the words, though silently: *Rats! Rats! We gotta get ridda the Rats!*

"Maybe there'd be enough rats even in Pleasantgrove for a test, Honey," he suggested, at length.

Mrs. Claybert shuddered.

"If you think I'm going to fool around with a lot of rats, Harold —"

"But it'd prove it, Honey."

"Maybe it would. But no rats. Not me."

Mr. Claybert sighed. "The trouble with women is they got imagination, but they don't *apply* it. I'm right out ahead of you, Honey. Look at it this way. If it works on rats, and it works on your friends, we've got something. Something big. Maybe we could get it really selective. Maybe we could get, say, all the smokers of Camels, or all the members of the After-Shave Club dancing in the streets. And would that be an ad! Oh, boy! And there'd be some nice political angles, too, I guess. Now, suppose you were to play it over a nation-wide hookup —"

"Harold! If you want any peace in this home, you'll put that imagination of yours right back in its cage, and let me think," Mrs. Claybert declared.

"But, Ethel, this thing can be big. We could figure out a movie angle, too. Kinda band-wagon for —"

"Harold! *Please!* — And will you stop that drumming!"

Breakfast the following morning was an even quieter meal than usual. Both the Clayberts appeared introspective. By a costly effort Harold Claybert had restrained himself from making further reference to the recorder. As a result it seemed to dominate the room in some way. He found his eyes wandering toward it continually. But only as he was about to leave did his resolution break down. At the door he hesitated.

"Honey, I've not even heard you play it," he said. "Couldn't you —? Well, just a note or two, maybe?"

His wife shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Harold, but the very last thing I said to myself before I went to sleep was: 'Ethel, don't you dare blow that thing again till you get it some place where it can't do any harm.' And I guess I'd better stick to that."

After he had gone, Mrs. Claybert did her cleaning speedily, if absent-mindedly. When she had set the house to rights she picked up the recorder, and polished it gently with a duster. She contemplated it in a thoughtful fashion for a moment, then she took the ivory mouthpiece from her bag and pushed it into place. She half lifted it to her mouth, and paused. Then she lowered it, and laid it on the table again. She went upstairs to fetch a coat. As she came down she picked up the recorder, and, with a slightly furtive air, hid it beneath the coat before she opened the front door.

Instead of getting out the car in her usual way she kept on down the path to the road. There she turned to her left, and began walking away from the town and the houses. After less than a mile a track led off to the right across a field. She followed it over that field and the next, and into the woods beyond. It was quiet there, and peaceful. Among the trees she felt removed from the world as well as hidden, and her own inner self stretched the creases out of its wings a little. A faint footpath slanted away from the track, and, following that for a short distance, she came to a small natural clearing. There, in the sun, she spread out her coat, laid the recorder carefully on it, and sat down.

In spite of the sunshine there was a tinge of gentle, eighteenth-century melancholy. In her present mood Mrs. Claybert found that not unpleasant.

For a while she sat, pensive; dreaming a little, with a touch of nostalgia. Not that she was unhappy. There was Jem — and Harold, too, of course, and Harold was a good husband, as husbands come. But she missed Jem. Germany

seemed a terrible long way away. There's a kind of wistful mood that can come on you when you stop to think that the only child God let you bear has somehow turned into a man who's halfway round the world — and you're over forty now. . . . You can't help wondering about it sometimes. Not kicking; just wondering what it might all have been like if, maybe, it had been some other way. . . .

After a bit Ethel Claybert picked up the recorder. She stroked the smooth wood with her fingertips because it was Jem who had sent it. She looked beyond it, beyond the trees, smiling a little. Then, still smiling, she put the ivory mouthpiece to her lips, and began to play. . . .

A meeting, on the front porch of Mayor Duncan's house by the cross-roads, included several of Pleasantgrove's more influential citizens. Though it was informal, it was clearly aware of obligations; it had, perhaps, authority, too; but what it excelled in was bewilderment. The only face to wear an expression of decision was Mrs. Partland's, but that was habitual, and this time nothing was coming of it. The look of reliability which Jim Duncan's conception of office caused him to wear was a kind of drop-scene, deceiving nobody. Mrs. Muller was offering comment and suggestion at her usual high velocity, but they had an expendable, radio-background quality. Everybody present stood looking out on Main Street in perplexity. Everybody, that is, except Mrs. Claybert who sat in the rocker, weeping quietly.

The sight of the junction of Main Street and Lincoln Avenue at that moment was one that nobody was going to forget. Not only the crossing itself, but the entrances to the four streets were jammed with children. The girls for the most part wore flaxen plaits hanging in pairs from beneath white caps embroidered with coloured flowers. Short sleeves puffed out at their shoulders above tight bodices, and their full, striped skirts were covered in front with bright aprons. The boys were in tunics of green or brown, and long tight pants. Their hats were colored, with the brims shaped to narrow peaks in front, and the high crowns each set with a feather. All the roadway looked as if it had been spread with a brilliant but restless carpet from which rose a hubbub of young voices mingled with the tocketty clatter of hundreds of small clogs.

Astonishment was not one-sidedly restricted to the citizens of Pleasantgrove. The children's faces reflected it. Most of them were still looking around them in bewilderment, and regarding the amenities of the town with cautious suspicion. Others were already discovering compensations. There was a group near the movie house stricken with delighted awe by the posters. Another had its noses flattened against the plate glass windows of Louise Pallister's Candy Store. Over their heads Louise herself could be observed bobbing about stressfully behind her barricaded door, her hands clasped, and

her mouth opening for alternate "Oh, dear!" — "Oh, my!" Across on the other corner there was a press where some juvenile instinct had already led to the discovery of the soda fountain in Tony's Drug Store. But these high spots of adventure were only local, on the fringes of the crowd. Within, it consisted of children who stared about them in puzzlement while little girls and boys clung, big-eyed and fearful, to their elder sisters' skirts.

Not one of the Pleasantgrove citizens showed the least joy in the situation.

"I don't get it," complained Al Deakin from the filling station. "Where the heck did they all come from?" he demanded. He turned aggressively on Mrs. Claybert. "How did they get here? Where *did* they come from?" he repeated.

Mrs. Claybert sniffed the unsympathetic atmosphere. Before she could answer Mrs. Partland said, decisively:

"We can leave that till later. What I want to know is now they *are* here, who is going to do something about it?" She looked pointedly at Mayor Duncan. "Something *has* to be done," she added, emphatically.

Jim Duncan maintained the air of a man detached, and thinking deeply. He was still keeping it up when Elmer Drew shuffled forward and plucked urgently at his sleeve. Elmer was a house-painter who doubled in the less spacious art of sign-writing, but both are professions which make a conscientious man finicky about details.

"How many do you reckon there'd be, Jim?" he asked.

Here was something a Mayor could try to answer. Jim relaxed slightly.

"H'm," he judged. "I'd say three thousand, Elmer. Not less. Maybe more."

"Uh-huh." Elmer nodded, and edged his way out of the group to get his brushes. The way he saw it, it'd be near enough to change the preliminary 3 of the population figure to a 6, just till someone made up the full count.

"Three thousand kids!" repeated Al Deakin. "Three *thousand*! Well, that fixes it, I guess. No community the size of ours can stand that."

"And how does that fix it?" asked Mrs. Partland, coolly.

"Why, makes it a State job. It's too big for us to handle."

"No!" said Mrs. Claybert, distinctly.

They looked at her.

"What do you mean, 'no'?" Al demanded. "What else? What can we do with three thousand kids? Comes to that, why should we? Seems to me you've got a mighty lot of explaining to do, Ethel Claybert."

Mrs. Claybert cast a forlorn glance round the semi-circle that enclosed her.

"Well, it's difficult to explain . . ." she said.

Mrs. Muller came generously to her rescue.

"I guess three thousand children are sometimes not much more difficult to explain than one," she said, sharply.

This reference to an obscure incident in Al Deakin's past had the effect of deflating him for the moment.

"Well, we can't just go on standing here and doing nothing," Mrs. Partland said. "Those children are going to have to be fed soon, and — er — looked after."

It was quite true. Wonder was giving way to fractiousness. Some of the larger girls had taken little ones up in their arms and were lulling them to and fro, golden plaits swinging. Mrs. Claybert ran down the steps and came back holding one pretty small thing close to her.

"That's right. We have to do *something*," agreed Mrs. Muller.

"There's that old army camp out by Rails Hill," said Mrs. Partland. "If we could feed them and take them out there —"

"And who's going to feed them?" demanded Al Deakin. "I hold that Ethel Claybert just ain't got the right to dump three thousand kids down here and expect . . ."

"I reckon Pleasantgrove folks will be able to find a meal or two for them," the Mayor put in. "But outside that — Oh, there's Larry!" He broke off. Like a shipwrecked mariner hailing a lifeboat he called across the street: "Hey, Larry!"

The cop looked up, and waved his big hand. He started to come over, wading carefully through children, and looking not unlike a man picking his way across a flower-bed.

"Who did it, anyway? Who brought 'em here?" he demanded as he climbed the steps.

Everybody looked at Mrs. Claybert. So did the cop.

"Are you responsible — for all this lot?" he inquired.

"Well, yes — I suppose I am . . ." admitted Mrs. Claybert.

"Three doggone thousand of 'em," put in Al Deakin. "Fifteen hundred little Gretchens, and fifteen hundred little Hanses — and not one word of American between the lot."

The cop tilted his cap back, and scratched.

"From Europe?" he asked.

"Well, yes . . ." said Mrs. Claybert again.

"You got their immigration papers?" inquired the cop.

"Well, no . . ." Mrs. Claybert told him.

The cop turned and surveyed the vista of children. He turned back.

"Lady," he said, "some place there's several freight cars of trouble marked 'Rush', and they're all headed your way." He paused. "What are they? D.P. children?" he added.

Mrs. Claybert detached her gaze from his, and looked out over the street.

"Why — why, yes," she said. "Yes — I guess that's just what they are."

"They don't look a bit like the D.P. children in *Life*," Mrs. Partland said. "Too clean. And tidy. Besides, they all looked happy before they began to get hungry."

"Wouldn't you be happy, coming to a town like Pleasantgrove after all those ruins over in Europe?" Mrs. Muller asked.

"They've got a right to look happy," said Mrs. Claybert, with a sudden firmness. "And Pleasantgrove has a duty to see that they are happy."

"Hey — !" began Al Deakin.

Mrs. Claybert clutched the little doll of a girl that she was holding more firmly to her breast.

"Aren't they lovely children? Did you ever see lovelier children?" she demanded.

"Sure they are, but —"

"And is there anything more valuable to a community than its children — and its children's happiness?" she went on, fiercely.

"Well, no, but —"

"Then I guess that makes Pleasantgrove the richest community in this state," concluded Mrs. Claybert, triumphantly.

There was a difficult silence.

"Er — sure. That's mighty true," agreed Mayor Duncan. "But right now we got to be practical." He turned an appealing eye on the cop.

The fascination of novelty was fast wearing thinner with the children. More of the little ones had begun to cry, few of the older ones still smiled. A girl in a brightly striped skirt with an embroidered blouse frothing out of her laced velvet bodice climbed up on to a box near the front of the dry goods store. Her mouth opened, and she began to sway with her arms. At first nothing was audible from the porch. Then voices round her took up the song. It spread outwards across the crowd until it drowned the crying. The children began to sway together as they sang, rippling like a field of barley in the wind. Mrs. Claybert swung the one she held in time with the rest. She listened to the unfamiliar words with a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes.

"What we gotta do," said the cop, cutting through the lilt of massed trebles, "what we gotta do is to get on to the State Orphanage and tell 'em to start in sending trucks right away. Then we got to see about feedin' the kids till the trucks pull in."

Mrs. Claybert stiffened.

"Orphanage!" she exclaimed, in a thrusting voice.

She put down the little girl, and advanced.

"We gotta be practical —" began the cop, but she stopped him with a gesture.

"For the first time in my life I'm ashamed to be a citizen of Pleasantgrove,"

she proclaimed, bitterly. "You could send all these lovely children off to be orphans?"

"But, Mrs. Claybert, they *are* orphans —"

Mrs. Claybert swept that aside.

"They come away from that dreadful Europe; they come here to the land of liberty and opportunity; they ask you for love — and you give them orphanages. Just what do you think they're going to say about the American way of life when they grow up?"

Mayor Duncan looked at her helplessly.

"But, Mrs. Claybert, you got to be reasonable —"

"Is this, or is this not, a Christian community?" demanded Mrs. Claybert. "I've lived in Pleasantgrove all my life. I thought Pleasantgrove folks were great-hearted folks. Now the test comes I find they haven't got hearts or Christian charity."

"Listen, lady," said the cop, in a placatory tone. "We got hearts *and* we got Christian charity — but the little thing we can't fix is Christian miracles."

Mrs. Claybert glared at him, and then at the rest. Without comment she picked up the recorder from the floor beside the rocker. Looking out across the singing children, she settled her fingers on the holes.

"You just don't *deserve* to have lovely children," she said.

She lifted the pipe. Then she paused.

"I guess —" she said, wistfully — "I guess the only thing that's wrong with children is that they grow up to be people like you."

And she put the pipe to her lips.

As the long mellow note floated out across Main Street the children began to turn and look at Mayor Duncan's porch. The singing faded away. The little ones ceased to cry, and smiled as their sisters put them on their feet. There was no sound but the single note, trembling a little . . . Mrs. Claybert put one foot forward. Her fingers fluttered up and down the pipe stem. The air came, light and gay, tripping brightly as sunbeams on broken water. Hundreds of small clogs began to patter with a click-clocketty noise to its rhythm.

Down the steps danced Mrs. Claybert, and off across Main Street, through a lane that opened among the children. They closed in behind her as she went, golden plaits and bright skirts swirling, red stockings flashing, feet tat-tattering.

There was a scuffle inside the Mayor's house and his two children bounded out across the porch to join the dancing crowd beyond.

"Hey! Stop them!" Jim Duncan called, but somehow neither he nor anyone else could move to do it.

Mrs. Claybert turned down Lincoln Avenue with the children streaming like a bouncing, bubbling, coloured flood behind her. Down the front yards the American children came tumbling to join the rest. Out of the school poured

another stream skipping and dancing to flow into the passing crowd and whirl away with them up the street.

"Hey! Mrs. Claybert! Come back!" bawled Mayor Duncan, but his hail was lost in the children's voices.

The only sound that could top the laughing and the singing and the clatter of clogs was the tune of Mrs. Claybert's pipe as she danced along ahead, across the fields, and way away to the woods beyond. . . .

By the time that conscientious citizen Elmer Drew had finished turning the 3 into a 6 hotter news had reached him. So when the first carloads of reporters, detectives and F.B.I. passed him as they came tearing into Pleasant-grove he was already painting out the population figure altogether, pending a revised estimate. After he had done that, he considered the lower board for a moment. Then he came to a decision, unscrewed it, and tucked it under his arm.

On his way back into town he met Mrs. Partland. Her children were walking sedately, one on either side of her. Elmer stopped and stared. Mrs. Partland beamed.

"The American children chose to come back to their own folks," she told him proudly.

"Yeh," agreed Mortimer Partland, Junior, with a nod. "They didn't have any ice cream, or movies, or gum — nothing but *dancing!* Was it corny!"

"And Mrs. Claybert?" asked Elmer.

"Oh, well, I guess she just *likes* dancing," said the young Mortimer Partland.

Elmer turned and walked back up the road. On the board he rewrote "Pop: 3,226," and then thoughtfully changed the last figure to a 5. Underneath, with a deep feeling of civic satisfaction, he refixed the board which said:

WATCH IT GROW



Ellery Queen once assembled a fine collection of sporting detective stories, but an anthologist who attempted a similar job in science fiction would be hard pressed to find even a small handful of stories of the sports of the future. We can hardly doubt that sports will play an important part in the interplanetary culture to come; but — along with the fine arts, the religion, and the sexual mores of the future — they've been largely ignored by technology-minded writers. Author-agent Larry Sternig attempted to remedy this neglect some six years ago in the sports pulp "Fight Stories," and with fascinating results — including a good reason for the manufacture of android robots. Steel beings in man's form could execute his more strength-demanding sports even better than man himself, couldn't they? Of course; but Mr. Sternig has a reservation up his sleeve . . .

Scrap Iron

by LARRY STERNIG

HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE SYSTEM

TONIGHT AT EIGHT

INVINCIBLE vs THE CRUSHER

1000 POUND CLASS

TUNE YOUR VISI TO KWP NETWORK

Every shuttle platform on Mars, and every crossroad, carried a duplicate of that sign today. Everybody would read it, although almost all the fans knew about it already. And at eight tonight practically every visiset in the system would tune in on the battle of the century.

Walt Correvon sighed. All those people were going to be disappointed, and most of them would blame him. Kra Kigor's Crusher had been champion long

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enough, most people felt. Most planets, except the people of Mars, of course, wanted to see the challenger from Earth win, partly because they disliked The Crusher and partly because — well, they wanted to give big Invincible a chance to clear himself of those old charges of having thrown a fight.

That old suspicion, an unjustified one, had almost died out now. But after tonight —

Walt remembered that it had been nearly an hour since he'd had the bad news. Maybe by now Pete would know more. Anyway, there wasn't a shuttlecar in sight.

He stepped quickly into a communicabooth and set the dials.

"Yeah?" said a voice. A voice that sounded weary and desperate.

"Pete, this is Correvon. Can you patch up Vince?"

"I got all his guts out, Mr. Correvon. I'm doing the best I can, but it looks bad. And all the cogs in that left tibia are —"

"You told me that, Pete. But listen, can we fight or do we have to forfeit?"

"I've got ten men working on him. We sent his right arm to Tyron where they do that tyronium welding. We're sticking in a full new set of tubes, even though it don't leave us any spares."

"Skip the details, Pete. Is or isn't Vince going to be ready to fight? Do we or don't we lose that half-million guarantee and sacrifice that hundred thousand we posted for a forfeit?"

"You'll be able to try with him, Mr. Correvon. But, frankly, the best we can make him will be a pushover."

"I'm on my way there," said Walt. "Keep at it. I've *got* to get in an hour or two at the controls. No telling how they'll respond after the rebuild."

There was a worried frown on his forehead as he stepped from the booth and got on the first westbound shuttlecar. He caught a glimpse of himself in the door mirror and immediately straightened out his face as best he could. If a newscast reporter caught him looking like that —

At the transfer platform, he had another short wait, and again he stepped into a communicabooth.

"Murray apartments," said a voice.

"Is Dot there? Walt Correvon speaking."

"Just a moment, Mr. Correvon."

And then, *her* voice: "Walt, what are you doing up? I thought you'd sleep all day to get ready for the fight."

"Don't worry about me," Walt said quickly. "Listen, honey — have you got the receiver set for privacy? I mean, could anyone else in the building be listening in on another outlet?"

Click of a switch. "It's private now, Walt. Why, is anything wrong?"

He lowered his voice. "Honey, they got at Vince last night."

"*Invincible?* Walt, how — what did they —?"

"Acid, Pete says it seems to have been dilute corrositate. Mixed with oil and put in at his oil-holes. It's a mess. The stuff wasn't strong enough to eat *through* anything, just enough to weaken the whole works. And we can't prove a thing; they got away with it clean and didn't leave a trace. If we complain, you know what'll happen. It will look like our alibi for throwing the fight. That old scandal —"

"But Walt, would Kra Kigor actually —?"

"He would, and did. He's backed The Crusher with his whole fortune, almost. But we haven't a shred of proof; it wouldn't even be our word against his. It'd be our guess against his word. All we can do is try to have Vince ready; go through with it and do our best."

"Oh, Walt, does *Dad know?* This must be awful for him; he's got every credit he has tied up in Vince. You know he invested everything in those super-selenium response centers you figured out."

"He knows, but he won't get there for a while yet. Soon as I know more I'll call you and —"

"No, Walt. I'm going there, too. I'll see you. 'Bye.'"

Walt left the booth and caught the first southbound car. Ten minutes later he entered the training quarters.

Pete Werrah, the head mechanic, surrounded by a dozen helpers, scarcely looked up. Walt was tall enough to peer over their shoulders at the thing on the worktable.

Contender for the heavyweight crown; intricately interlocking duralloy plates, many of them now removed, covered a mass of machinery. Activating mechanisms that implemented the radio controls, more delicate than the works of the finest watch; muscle cable gear chains, compact but tremendously powerful. As powerful and efficient as ten years' work and a half million credits investment could make them. And the radio controls themselves, responsive to the shadowy ghost of an ampere and tuned to a wave-band as fine as frog hair.

"How's it coming, Pete?" Walt asked.

The mechanic looked up and ran a grimy hand across an already streaked forehead. "We can't work miracles, Mr. Correvon. We got ten hours now till the fight, and it's taken ten weeks to get him as smooth as he was before this happened."

"But isn't there a chance that —?"

"No. He'll be working tonight, after a fashion. He'll be able to walk out there and take a few wallops before he goes down. That'll save Mr. Murray losing the forfeit. But dance him away from The Crusher. All defense, and you might last him a few minutes, maybe, long enough to make it look good."

Walt groaned. "If it's that bad, maybe we better tell —"

"Sure, and you know what everybody'll say. Alibi. Crying in advance. Maybe trying to shift the betting odds. And the ones that have already bet on him will —" He shrugged and went back to work on Vince.

Walt walked moodily across the big room to the portable control board and sat down in front of it. Tonight — in front of a visicast audience of millions — he'd sit down at that control board and the big Martian, owner-operator of the mighty Crusher, would sit down at one similar to it. And what was supposed to be the most important sporting event of all time would turn out to be a fiasco. It would have been a great battle if —

The juice wasn't on, but Walt let his fingers drift among the controls, slid his feet into the slipper-levers that controlled the robot's footwork — or part of it — and tried to visualize Vince out there responding —

But it was like trying to play a tune on a piano without any strings. Without Vince responding to those delicate controls, the practice was worthless; didn't mean a thing.

There was a click of heels across the floor and he turned, knowing from the sound that it was Dot Murray. He stood up and turned just in time to take her in his arms.

"Walt, Dad's here. I came up in the lift with him. He's talking to the members of the commission, trying to see if he can get a postponement without forfeiting. If only —"

"With the weight Kigor swings with that board —" Walt said, shaking his head. "Nope, honey, we'll have to try. Let's see if the news is out yet."

He crossed to the newscaster and flicked the switch. "Commentator Broo's on the air. He generally gets things before they even happen. He —"

"Shhh."

". . . and that," said the newscaster, "pretty well takes care of the space situation. Now for something really important, friends, THE BIG FIGHT. A nasty little rumor has just come in that Murray, owner of Invincible, is asking a postponement. He claims that *someone* (Why not come right out and accuse Kigor by name, Murray?) has sabotaged Big Vince. Or maybe bribed him? Can it be that Correvon, Vince's speed-artist operator, is going to take another — Pardon, delete that word 'another' for lack of proof in the first instance — dive? Not that I think so myself, but, after all, there is a lot at stake and some of the big betters think —"

Walt reached out and flicked the dial to another station.

His face was white with anger. "See, honey? Damn them, we'll fight The Crusher if I have to put on a suit of antique armor and go out there myself and —"

"Walt, just how much *does* depend on this fight?"

"The championship of the System, Dot. Not to mention a little matter like my savings. I —"

Pete Werrah's voice, yelling across the room, cut in on them. "Hey, guys! Bring that left leg over here!"

The light above the arena was almost blindingly brilliant. Seated at the control board and looking out over the top of it into the ten-yard circular ring, Walt Correvon fiddled with the controls and watched Big Vince shuffle and shadow-box in the marked-off neutral area to the left of the ring. On the right, The Crusher, champion of the Solar System, was going through similar gyrations under the control of Kra Kigor, seated opposite Correvon on the far side of the ring.

Weighing in was over. The Crusher had scaled two pounds under the half-ton maximum allowed in the heavyweight class. Vince was five pounds under. Three pounds of metal difference on a thousand pounds—but that three pounds had been eaten off by acid, Walt knew, at points where the damage done gave him an almost hopeless disadvantage.

Pete and his crew had performed near-miracles in getting Vince ready at all. There hadn't been time for the usual ultra-delicate adjustments. Vince was slow to respond. The automatics were okay, though. Walt set the backward shuffle switch and watched Vince's footwork.

Left feint. Right cross, third of a second too slow.

"Testing," said the microphone. The lights grew even brighter as the four giant visi-receptor cameras swung into action.

"Focus okay," said another microphone.

"Seven fifty-seven," said the shrill voice of the invisible audiclock. After eight, it would sing out simply "One" for one minute of elapsed time of the fight, "Two" for two, and monotonously on until the sixty-minute limit.

"Into the ring," came the order. Walt's fingers danced over the keyboard and Vince climbed the ropes, stood at immobile attention just inside them.

"Seven fifty-eight," shrilled the audiclock.

The Crusher was in the ring, too, now, his six-inch-thick arms swinging aggressively. Twelve yards away, Kigor was grinning at him across the top of the control board. A sardonic, amused grin that made Walt almost wish that he and Kigor were going out there into the ring, instead of the fighting robots.

Men *had* done that once, he recalled. At least Earthmen did. Way back in ancient, barbarous times. Men had fought with their bare hands in square rings—or had it been bare hands? No, he remembered now; they'd used a kind of leather glove called a cestus. Gladiators, they'd called them. There had been a great gladiator named Dempsey, who was ten feet tall, and there'd been the champion gladiator Joseph Louis, who had also been a famous aviator. He'd

left the ring at the height of his career to fly a plane called the Brown Bomber in the Earth war of liberation.

Or was all that merely legend, like the old belief in werewolves and gangsters? Why should human beings have fought one another for the amusement of crowds, when robots could fight so much more efficiently? With such satisfying clangor and reverberation of blows? Why, one tap from a bantamweight robot would knock —

“Seven fifty-nine.”

“On the ether,” barked the referee, who operated in a glass cubicle overhead. “In this corner —” Walt didn’t listen to the introductions of the robots and their operators. He was getting his hands into exact juxtaposition over the keyboard, flexing and limbering his fingers.

The referee finished. “Two-way,” ordered the direction microphone, and suddenly there was the roar of the crowd. All over Mars, indeed all over the system, millions of people grouped in front of visisets were yelling and cheering. Those yells and cheers came back to the station pickups and were blended into a rising, falling “roar of the crowd” background without which no major sport-cast would be complete. Individual voices were only rarely distinguishable, but without that crowd-roar the event itself would have lost color.

“Eight o’clock,” shrieked the audivoice of the automatic timer. “Go!”

Walt let Vince fall backward and bounce off the springy steel ring cables, then charge forward. There wouldn’t be any chance, this time, to feel out his opponent with a few minutes of cautious boxing. His one slim chance was a quick assault.

Vince rushed, his ponderous footsteps shaking the ring, left arm extended, right cocked. The Crusher braced to meet the attack. Vince’s right — too slow. The Crusher ducked under it and countered with a blow to the chest that sounded like gyrocars crashing head-on. Vince fell back from the impact, and there was a dent in his chest-plates.

He bobbed, and came up with an uppercut — or what would have been one if his responses hadn’t been slowed by the weakening of the acid and the hasty rebuild. The blow whistled upward past The Crusher’s chin, and a counter-blow that would have ended the contest flashed right at Vince’s face. Walt’s index finger, moving with the speed of lightning, tapped a key and Vince’s head jerked to the right. Fast enough to avoid the full force of the blow. It rasped along his metal cheek and took off his left ear.

Then he was safely back out of range, and circling. That wild rush had failed. There wasn’t a dent or a scratch on The Crusher to show for it.

“One,” shrilled the audiclock. Invincible had survived one minute — out of sixty.

Walt watched The Crusher warily. What was Kigor up to? He could force

the fight easily now by wading in. But Kigor had some other plan of battle. The Crusher merely turned, as though on a pivot, while Vince circled. The Crusher's left wasn't extended; both fists were cocked at his sides and he looked wide open. He was inviting Vince to lead, standing pat.

Walt shot a glance at the other operator. Kigor was intent on the robots, waiting — for something. What was his plan of action?

The roar of the crowd grew; getting impatient. They demanded noise and action. They were paying millions, via the visiset tax, to see this fight, and they wanted their credits' worth of metallic clangor.

Well — he couldn't circle forever. Walt's fingers moved swiftly and smoothly. His battler moved ahead, bobbed and weaved once, then swung his left at The Crusher's head.

And then Walt knew what Kigor had been waiting for. Instead of ducking, The Crusher's bludgeon of a fist lashed out almost simultaneously with Vince's. The fists met in mid-air between the robots with the combined force of the blows.

There was a crack and rend of metal. Vince's arm, the muscle-cables hopelessly broken, dropped to his side. And then The Crusher was suddenly swarming forward, raining blow after reverberating blow on his crippled opponent.

Walt's fingers danced like mad, making Vince ride with those devastating sledge-hammer wallops. Shuffling him back in a circular path of retreat that would keep him from being trapped and smashed against the ropes.

Somehow, despite the terrific concentration it took to do that, Walt caught a glimpse of Kigor's face. The Martian was grinning.

There was a cold ball of something that seemed too physical for anger, somewhere inside Walt Correvon. If he'd needed any proof of Kigor's connection with the sabotage of Vince, that grin furnished it; that grin and the tactics he'd just used with The Crusher.

He'd known that acid had weakened those muscle cables; he'd known the inevitable damage to Vince from deliberately meeting a blow with another, fist to fist, force to force.

Walt kept Vince in the automatic back-shuffle so he could concentrate every bit of attention on finding an opening for a telling blow with Vince's one good arm. His only chance now was to land with that right on a vital spot.

It swung like a mace, that right hand of Vince's. Once in a while it got through. The Crusher wasn't unmarked any more. But Vince was taking four blows for every one he gave. His other ear was gone. What had been his face now looked like scrap-iron.

The Crusher came through with a terrific left hook that would have torn Vince's head off, if Walt hadn't seen it coming and set the balance compensator to ride with the blow. Not that he set it consciously; there isn't time to do

much consciously when one directs a fighting robot. It's a matter of split-second automatic responses. The blow flung Vince backward, but he kept his balance.

It seemed to stagger The Crusher, too. He took a full back step, and, under Walt's frantic fingers, Vince waded in, swinging. And then Walt knew that The Crusher's backing had been deliberate; that he'd walked into it again. The Crusher's fist met Vince's squarely. And again there was the crack of metal and Vince's right arm came only part way up in response to Walt's quick jab of the biceps-button.

The crowd was roaring for the knockout.

The Crusher stormed in, now completely confident and completely belligerent, facing an opponent whose arms no longer worked. Blows came so fast that Vince could dodge only a few of them.

For a black instant, Walt almost jabbed at the off key. Why wait until Vince was battered down? He was helpless out there; why not let him fall and get it over with? True, Big Vince was practically scrap-iron already, but —

He caught another glimpse of Kigor, grinning triumphantly. And there was that cold something inside Walt again. If it was anger, it was a kind he'd never known before. Something more. He seemed to see that saturnine grinning face through a reddish haze, and there was a roaring in his ears that drowned out the clangor of steel and the scream of the crowd. He was in the grip of an emotion he hadn't known existed. It wasn't just in his mind. It was in all of him. In his fists; it clenched them for him. He wanted to —

He did.

Through that red haze he jumped to his feet and vaulted over the cables, across the ring toward Kra Kigor. He was going to knock the —

Suddenly something monstrous loomed in his path. Kigor had seen him coming. Like the well-oiled piece of machinery that he was, The Crusher wheeled from battering his helpless opponent, and blocked the way across the ring to Kigor. Big Vince, on his automatics, still shuffled meaninglessly backward away from nothing.

The Crusher raised his huge fist. It swung toward him; but Walt Correvon's nerves were timed to the same split-second impulse as those of the robot's operator. And he was trained to do things first and think them out afterward. He couldn't have told you how it was possible for a fragile hundred-eighty-pound man to knock down a thousand-pound metal robot, but his body did it for him.

He slid to one side of that deadly blow and brought up his own right to The Crusher's steel jaw. At the last instant he opened his fist to make it a flat-handed blow. It stung, but to have struck with clenched fingers would have broken every bone in his hand.

And The Crusher was falling — forward. Automatically, seeing a blow about to land on his robot's face, Kigor set the balance compensator — the same setting he would have used to compensate for a sledge-hammer steel-fisted blow from another robot. And Walt's blow — comparatively the mere brush of a feather — put The Crusher off balance. He slid aside as the huge steel robot toppled, and went on through to the other side, reaching for Kigor.

He yanked the operator out of his seat before he could get The Crusher back on his feet again. There was sudden panic in Kigor's face and he wasn't grinning any more. He gave a yell for help, looking upward toward the referee's cubicle, and then tore loose from Correvon's grip and ran. There was only one direction open — into the arena. He dove between two of the cables.

Walt could have caught and pulled him back — but there'd be more room inside the ring for what he wanted to do. Instead he vaulted over the cables again, and landed beside Kigor. As the latter straightened up, Walt landed a stinging flat-handed blow on his face. Kra Kigor's cheek turned white, then red.

"If you want to talk to the referee," Walt raged, "tell him what you did to Vince."

"You're crazy. I —"

Walt hit him again, and suddenly and surprisingly the Martian galvanized into action. It was obvious now that he wasn't a coward; his first reaction had merely been surprise. After all, fighting was against the law. Nobody actually hit anyone else in modern times.

And as Kigor's fist suddenly exploded in his face, Walt realized, through a haze of pain, that getting Kigor to fight was only half of it. He had to lick him, and the Martian was bigger and perhaps stronger. The blow rocked Walt back on his heels, and he retreated to get his balance; then bored back in, fists pumping.

He tried to imagine that he was Big Vince; to dodge and punch as he would have directed the robot to do. But this was different, very different. Outside a ring, one could see clearly. But here, fists got in your eyes.

He fell back, circling, planning a new offensive. He remembered to keep his left extended, to feint with it and try to punch his opponent off balance while he brought up the right with enough force to act as the heavy artillery.

The dull thud of punches sounded strange. They didn't clang as they should. There was a confused roaring in his ears, though. And when Kigor's fist slammed his jaw, suddenly there were bright little spots of light in front of his eyes that looked like stars.

But he shook his head, and it cleared. He put his head down and bored in, both fists lashing out like rocket blasts against Kigor's ribs. He'd have to hurry. In a minute the police would come in here and break it up and arrest him. He lunged forward, boring his head in under the Martian's chin, and pumped those

short, vicious blows into the abdomen as hard and as fast as he could. Kigor was grunting, gasping.

Then suddenly Kigor's thick arms wrapped around his shoulders in a clinch and he was being pulled off balance and thrown. They crashed to the floor together. Correvon gave a convulsive wriggle that put him behind Kigor and locked his legs around his middle. When Kigor tried to reach back, Walt caught his arm and bent it until Kigor howled suddenly.

"Talk, and I'll let you go," he panted.

The thud of ponderous footsteps, and suddenly the words that Kigor was howling made sense. "Vince! Let go, you fool, or he'll fall on top of us and kill us!"

Walt looked up. Invincible, still shuffling automatically backward around the ring, was five feet away and backing directly toward them. Five more backward steps and he'd trip over them and fall. Almost a thousand pounds of compact metal would crash down on their interlocked bodies.

"Let go! You'll get us both killed. Vince'll drop on us! He weighs a thousand —"

"Not quite," Walt panted. "A little less after that acid. Talk, and talk fast. Or we stay here."

"You —" Kigor struggled violently, but he was caught fast. The big robot was only two paces away now. "You —"

"Okay," said Walt. "Then he falls on us."

Cold sweat streamed down Kigor's large forehead. The ponderous thud of another footstep. "Yes!" he screamed frantically. "I put acid in him last night. I hired —"

Almost, they didn't make it. There wasn't time to get up before Vince's feet would trip over them.

Walt rolled, pulling the Martian with him.

It was morning. Not early morning, for a lot had happened the night before. Not the least part, by any means, being his marriage to Dot Murray. You could hardly call it an elopement, since Mr. Murray had given his blessings and gone with them to the registrar.

Walt sat up in bed and stretched. His movements awakened his wife and she opened her eyes sleepily and yawned.

"Morning, Mrs. Correvon," he sang out, smiling down at her. "And how's my —"

"Walt, turn on the newscaster. I want to hear —"

"— that we won the fight? You know that, honey." But he flicked the switch.

"Big news of the morning," said the commentator, "is the sudden demand

for revival of an ancient sport; I believe it used to be known on Earth as the art of fisticuffs. You've already heard, of course, that The Crusher was disqualified last night after his operator's confession of sabotage — in fact, most of you heard that confession yourselves, and the excitement that followed. Invincible is now heavyweight champion.

"But the real news is that Sportscasts, Inc., have been swamped with requests for restoration of the ancient sport. The visiset spectators have found a new thrill; they went mad last night at the spectacle of a real flesh-and-blood battle. The Commission has appointed a research committee to rediscover the rules that used to govern pre-robot fistic contests. They have named Walt Correvon as the first modern champion of the system and are seeking an opponent to challenge —"

"Walt! You wouldn't —"

"Shhh!"

"It is rumored that he will be offered a half-million guarantee, and a percentage of the visiset tax for the battle. Many believe the new sport will completely outshadow robot-boxing in popularity. And now for my predictions on the inter-solar races —"

Walt's fingers snapped the switch. They were trembling just a little. "Dot!" he said, putting his arms around her. "We're rich! *Now* are you glad you married me?"

"But Walt — you might get hurt —"

"Phooey. Listen, honey, that audience last night found out it's fun to watch a fight, but I learned — Dot, I learned that it's *fun to fight*. Sometimes, anyway. Maybe those ancients weren't so dumb after all."



We pride ourselves, as you know, on bringing you fresh new talents by buying the first stories of unpublished writers; and more than one of our discoveries (such as Betsy Curtis or Richard Matheson) have already become well established as writers in the field of fantasy and science fiction. But publishing schedules are capricious things; and occasionally a discovery double-crosses us by selling and having published a half dozen stories before we've managed to bring you his "first." You've already seen some bright items elsewhere from Chad Oliver, a Texas college student who recently graduated from science fiction fan to professional writer; now, with our patented and exclusive editorial time machine, we take you back to Mr. Oliver's debut in the first story he ever sold — a highly satisfactory blend of comedy and chills, of the absurdities of mid-twentieth century progress and the grimness of an undatable horror.

The Boy Next Door

by CHAD OLIVER

IT WAS FIVE O'CLOCK by the clock on the studio wall. Behind his glass partition, the balding engineer waved his right hand at Harry Royal.

"Hello again, kids!" Harry said in a hearty voice.

The youthful studio audience squealed with delight. A little girl in a pink dress snacked her hands together enthusiastically. Harry moaned to himself. What a way to make a living!

"Yes, sir," he said, careful to keep a big, cheery smile on his face. "Five o'clock again, boys and girls, and you all know what *that* means!" He winked at the adults in his audience — must be parents, he thought. Why else should they torture themselves? He said: "Ha, ha. Station ZNOX, right here in the good old Hotel Murphy, again brings you *The Boy Next Door*, the program where you get to hear your very own friends speak to you over the radio. This is your old Uncle Harry Royal, getting the old program under way again. How are you all this evening, hmmm?"

The kids in the audience assured him that they were fine. They always were, thought Harry grimly. They would be. He smiled wanly and tried to look like a good scout.

"Well sir," he continued, "as you all know, old Uncle Harry picks one of your names out of the little old red box every day, Monday through Friday,

and invites the lucky winner down here to the good old Hotel Murphy to talk over the radio." His smile felt a trifle limp and he engineered a fresh one. "This afternoon, our guest is young Jimmy Walls, from away out in Terrace Heights."

Applause. Harry wondered why. What had Jimmy Walls ever done? Set fire to the school?

Jimmy Walls eyed Harry gravely. He was an eager looking boy in what was obviously a brand new suit. His straw-colored hair was slicked back precariously. He had bright blue eyes and his tie was crooked.

"Don't be afraid now, Jimmy," said Harry Royal.

"I'm not afraid," Jimmy Walls assured him.

"Well, well — that's fine, Jimmy, fine. There — stand a little closer to the microphone. Fine. Dandy. How old are you, Jimmy?"

"I'm eight years old, going on nine."

The same questions. The same answers. Harry Royal decided, not for the first time, that he hated kids. All of them.

"Mighty fine, Jimmy," he said. "Mighty fine. Yes sir, that's fine. Where do you go to school, Jimmy?"

"I go to Terrace Heights School," answered Jimmy. He added: "When I go."

"When you go? Ha, ha. You don't mean to tell your old Uncle Harry that you skip school sometimes?"

"Sometimes," Jimmy admitted.

Harry worked on his smile again. Didn't they ever say anything new or interesting?

"You're not very bright, are you?" he wanted to say.

"What programs on good old ZNOX do you like best?" he said.

Jimmy Walls thought about it briefly. Then his blue eyes glistened. "Golly," he exclaimed, "I like *The Hag's Hut* best. I like *Terror in the Night*, too!"

Well, thought Harry. Just a nice, healthy, American boy. Nothing like horror programs for the little, growing minds.

"Ha, ha," Harry Royal chuckled dutifully. "Don't those programs scare you, Jimmy?"

"They don't scare *me*," Jimmy retorted indignantly.

"Ha, ha. I see. Yes, I see." Harry Royal fumbled around for something to say and came up with: "Why do you like those programs best, Jimmy?"

"I like the way they kill people," Jimmy replied instantly. "They sure are smart!" His blue eyes were bright with admiration.

That one stopped Harry Royal for a second, but he bounced back in a hurry. Nothing ever stopped Harry Royal for long, no sir! "But they always get caught, don't they, Jimmy?" he suggested. "Crime doesn't pay, you know."

He winked broadly at the adults in the studio.

"Maybe," hedged Jimmy Walls reluctantly.

"Hmmmim. Well, well. I see. Yes, sir." Better change the subject, Harry decided. Definitely. You never could tell about parents, studio brass, and the FCC. He chose a safe topic: "What have you been doing all week, old man?"

"Killing people," Jimmy Walls announced proudly.

Pause. Harry began to feel uncomfortable. "Ha, ha," he said, without humor. "Come now, Jimmy. Ha, ha. Come now — honesty is the best policy."

"I *am* honest," muttered Jimmy Walls insistently. He shuffled his feet, smearing the fresh polish on his shiny brown shoes. "Nobody ever believes me."

"Oh, I believe you, all right. If you say so, Jimmy. Ha, ha — just a regular cut-up, I guess! Do you use a knife, Jimmy? Ha, ha."

"No," Jimmy Walls stated flatly.

"Well, well. Yes, sir! This younger generation!" Harry winked hugely at the studio audience. Several of the adults smiled weakly, but the children sat very still, listening to Jimmy Walls raptly.

"You don't believe me, honest," accused Jimmy. "You're just saying that. You'll see."

Harry felt peculiar. Not worried, or afraid, or anything like that, he assured himself. Of course not. Just — well, *funny*.

"Well, Jimmy," he said, feeling quite clever, "if you kill people, why don't you get caught, eh? Crime doesn't pay, you know! Ha, ha. No, sir. Honesty is the best policy. I guess you listen to old ZNOX and try out everything you hear, hmmm?"

"*That's* not the way." Jimmy Walls looked disgusted.

"How do you do it then?" Harry was getting desperate. "You must be awfully smart."

"I'm not so smart."

Harry Royal worked up a new smile. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Seven minutes to go. He decided to try another angle.

"Then you were just kidding your old Uncle Harry, huh, Jimmy? Ha, ha. You have a lively sense of humor, all right."

"Golly, no." Jimmy Walls tugged nervously at his tight collar. "You don't understand. I've killed *lots* of people."

Harry Royal frowned. Then, remembering himself, he turned it into what would have to pass for a smile. Until the real thing came along, he thought to himself. He felt a little better. Time for the man-to-man angle, he decided.

"Well sir, Jimmy," he said heartily, "you want to be careful with that kind of talk. Yes, sir. Now, *I* understand, of course — old Uncle Harry understands kids pretty well, you bet. But other people might get the wrong idea. Then what will you do?"

"Uncle George will fix it," Jimmy said, after a short pause.

"Uncle George?"

"Uncle George."

Harry Royal felt an unaccustomed chill race down his spine. It felt like a cold centipede with little crystals of ice on its legs. Harry didn't like it. Something was wrong here. He knew it. Maybe Jimmy was just kidding him along — of course he was! Of course. But amateurs — kids at that — seldom carried out a gag over the air, even if they had one planned. There was something about a microphone —

"Uncle George must be quite a man," he heard himself saying.

"Oh gosh, no!" Jimmy protested.

"You mean he isn't remarkable, then?"

"I mean he isn't a *man*, Uncle George isn't."

Harry determined to keep talking. "I see, I see," he said, not seeing in the least. "A blue midget with twelve legs, maybe? Ha, ha." Harry managed a wink for the audience, but he had given up his smile. He noticed that several of the adults were looking startled, and one old lady was frowning her disapproval. That was bad. The children looked awed and envious — a composite picture of shining eyes and open mouths. Fiends, thought Harry.

"He is not a midget with twelve legs, Uncle George isn't," Jimmy Walls declared. "I'd be scared. Uncle George *looks* like a man."

"But he — isn't?" asked Harry, knowing the answer in advance.

"No."

"How do you know?"

"You can tell."

It was a mad conversation — mad for anywhere, but unthinkable for radio. Harry Royal was worried; he'd hear about this. He tried to smooth it over. "Well," he said jovially, "you out there in the radio audience must be having quite a time, ha, ha. Yes, sir. It isn't often that we get a real killer here on *The Boy Next Door*, ha, ha. But I'm sure that you all remember little Bobby Boyle, who slaughtered all those soldiers in Burma, and Stu Dailey from Westmont, who said he was a werewolf. There just isn't any limit to young imaginations, no, sir. Quite a healthy sign, too — take it from old Harry Royal."

He turned back to Jimmy, who had remained perfectly impassive during Harry's speech to the radio audience. "What do you want to be when you grow up, Jimmy?" he asked, searching for a safe subject. "A fireman? A G-Man?"

Jimmy Walls looked thoughtful. Then: "No," he said suddenly. His blue eyes glistened. "I want to be a —"

A horrible thought crossed Harry Royal's mind and he cut Jimmy short. "Let's talk about baseball," he boomed heartily. "Grand old game, baseball."

"I'll bet you like baseball, eh, Jimmy?" He wouldn't have bet much, he assured himself.

"It's all right, I guess." Jimmy wasn't very enthused.

"I'll bet you get real excited when you listen to a game, don't you?" continued Harry doggedly.

"No," said Jimmy. "It's not near as much fun as —"

"Football," supplied Harry Royal. "Football. Grand old game." He looked grimly at the studio clock. Two minutes to go.

"I didn't mean —" Jimmy began patiently.

"Ha, ha. Of course you didn't mean all that about killing people, Jimmy. Boys will be boys, yes, sir! Old Uncle Harry understands. You don't have to explain to him, no, sir."

For once in his life, Harry Royal didn't know what to say. He winked again at the studio audience and decided to end it before Jimmy started off on another grisly tangent. "Well, Jimmy," he said cheerfully, "I've sure enjoyed having you up here on *The Boy Next Door*, and I'm sure that all your little friends have enjoyed listening to you, too. I'm sorry that the little old clock tells me that our time is up. Good-by, Jimmy Walls! We hope that you'll be back with us again real soon." Over my dead body, thought Harry.

"Good-by, Mr. Royal," said Jimmy politely.

"Yes, sir," Harry continued. "Ha, ha. We had quite a time this evening here on *The Boy Next Door*, and I hope that all of you enjoyed Jimmy Walls as much as your Uncle Harry did. Yes, sir. You all want to be on hand again tomorrow, same time, same station, when old ZNOX, here in the Hotel Murphy, will again present your favorite program and mine, *The Boy Next Door*. Until then, this is your old friend, Harry Royal, wishing each and every one of you a very pleasant good evening."

Harry signaled the engineer and cut off the microphone. He sighed shortly. What a mess! How could he ever explain it? Of course, it wasn't his fault; he had done all he could. But try to tell that to the brass in the office! He wasn't looking forward to the occasion.

The studio was almost empty now. The silence began to hang heavily over the sound-proofed room, with the only sounds drifting in from the hall outside. As he watched, the last of the audience filed through the door, and the door closed behind him. Even the engineer had left. The silence was complete.

"Mr. Royal?" questioned a small voice.

Harry turned around slowly, hoping against hope that he hadn't identified that voice correctly. But he had. It was Jimmy Walls, sitting in one of the metal chairs on the stage. "What are you doing here?" demanded Harry. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. "Haven't you got a ride home?"

"Yes, sir."

"But it hasn't come yet, is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it'll be along shortly," Harry Royal assured him. "It was nice knowing you." He started to leave.

"Mr. Royal?"

Harry stopped. "Yes?" he questioned sharply.

"Mr. Royal, will you wait here with me until my ride comes? I'd be scared in here." Jimmy Walls looked small and afraid in the bright studio lights.

Harry Royal hesitated. He didn't like studios, especially empty ones. They gave him the creeps; they were too quiet. But he was in enough hot water now — if he left the kid in there alone, and the bigwigs found out about it, it wouldn't help things any. After all, he told himself, it's just a little kid.

"*You* scared?" he laughed nervously. "That's a good one."

"I'd be scared all by myself, honest, Mr. Royal. Don't leave me here." Jimmy Walls looked up at him imploringly with big, blue eyes.

"Your parents coming here for you?" Harry asked, somewhat mollified.

"No, sir."

"I thought you said you had a ride home."

"I do, sir. Uncle George is coming."

That icy centipede tripped down Harry's spine again. He became acutely aware of the deserted studio, with its empty rows of staring seats. They were utterly alone. No one could hear through those sound-proofed walls. He looked narrowly at the small figure before him — young, blue-eyed.

He's just a kid. Relax!

"Uncle George," said Harry slowly. "That's the one who fixes things up for you?"

"Gosh, yes! He tells me just what to do. He sure is smart!"

"The one who looks like a man, but isn't?" Harry Royal wanted to hear his voice say that. It made him feel better; the whole thing was so ridiculous.

"Oh, you can tell."

"You certainly have some imagination, Jimmy." Harry hoped that it was imagination. It had better be imagination. He looked at Jimmy Walls speculatively. Jimmy Walls looked at him the same way.

"You'll be good," Jimmy said suddenly.

Harry felt the silence close in around him. He couldn't laugh, somehow. It wasn't funny any more. He decided that it was time for him to leave, ride or no ride.

Footsteps.

"Here comes Uncle George now," Jimmy said.

The steps paused outside the studio door. Uncle George walked in.

"See?" inquired Jimmy Walls proudly. "He *looks* human."

Harry Royal took a deep breath of relief. Uncle George *was* human. Of course he was! A nice little fat man with a red face who wheezed as he walked. Harry noted the conservative gray suit, the old hickory walking stick.

Jimmy Walls waved happily. "Hi, Uncle George!"

The cheery little fat man grinned at Harry Royal and patted Jimmy affectionately. "Hello, Jimmy my boy! Hello there!" He turned to Harry Royal and extended his hand.

"I'm George Johnson," he chuckled. He had a rich, mellow voice that bubbled with good nature. "I hope I haven't detained you? I heard the broadcast, but was unavoidably detained."

"Uncle George never goes out while the sun is up," Jimmy explained.

George Johnson laughed heartily, shaking Harry's hand. He had a firm, pleasant grip. "I hope Jimmy's talk hasn't upset you," he said solicitously.

"Not at all," lied Harry. "The boy has quite an imagination."

"Yes, yes! Jimmy's quite a talker, aren't you, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Walls squirmed nervously.

"Ha, ha," laughed Harry Royal. "Jimmy's been telling me that you help him kill people." He winked at George Johnson.

"He *does*," insisted Jimmy. "Don't you, Uncle George?"

"You bet I do," Uncle George assured him. "You bet I do, Jimmy." He winked broadly at the smiling Harry Royal.

George Johnson straightened Jimmy's tie for him and laughed jovially. "Now, Jimmy," he admonished. "You say good-by to Mr. Royal."

"Good-by, Mr. Royal," Jimmy said, a gleam of delight in his blue eyes.

"Good-by, Jimmy!" answered Harry Royal, unheeding. He felt fine now. "See you around, Mr. Johnson!"

"Quite possibly, quite possibly," bubbled Uncle George. He steered Jimmy Walls to the door and out of the studio. The happy little fat man turned back to Harry Royal, his red face beaming.

Harry Royal laughed and winked prodigiously.

Uncle George smiled and turned away again.

What is he doing? What is—

Harry Royal's heart pounded treacherously. His face paled suddenly and he clutched desperately at the dead microphone.

Uncle George was *backing* toward him from the studio door. That wasn't so bad. No. But in the exact center of the back of his balding head was a large, blue eye. And it *winked* at him with a hideous regularity, over and over again. Wink — step — wink — step — *wink* —

Harry Royal caught a fleeting glimpse of little Jimmy Walls. His small, eager face peered intently from the studio doorway, shining blue eyes wide in anticipation.

In this brief example of perfectly sustained mood, Arthur Cox argues most plausibly that not all the planets to be discovered will be worlds of high adventure, peopled with weirdly alien life or cultures at an incredibly high level of mental development. No. Some will be quiet, calm, whereon life will be placid perfection. But to these planets, too, man will have to adjust. . . .

The Twilight Planet

by ARTHUR J. COX

"Prepare for landing. All passengers will please strap themselves into their safety cradles. All passengers will —"

With deliberate majesty the ship sinks out of the stars toward the planet. Pompously, it clears its myriad throats of the phlegm of flame and smoke. It speaks in muted thunder and you listen; listen to the word which it repeats, for it seems to you that you should understand, that it says a word which wavers elusively just beyond the range of meaning. . . .

The impression is shrugged away. Across the gulf of light years you have come to a destination you have long dreamed about and, now, it is disembarking time.

The ship descends on pillars of fire.

Your fingers have a strange calmness as you unlace yourself from the cradle. The disembarkation is quiet and leisurely, marking the movement of tempos to come.

You stand on the field, unmindful of the subdued noises about you. It is twilight. The sun is sinking behind the hills in the west. You know that that movement will never be completed, that twilight will never deepen into night.

For this is the Twilight Planet.

Not far from Earth through space it rolls around its parent star in an invisible, circular groove. But it is different from Earth. Watchfully alert, it holds one face constantly to its sun.

Thus, there on that face is eternal daylight and — *fury! Heat* — malignant heat as only the mind of Dante could conceive: that surface is seared, blasted, sunburned. Brilliant, brittle, flaked and cracked. Its very earth writhes, tortured and twisted; the ground fissures, hills split, and mountains rupture, spilling molten liquids from volcanic maws. The air seethes; its molecules are

violently divorced from their atoms, stripped of their parts, by the sudden, juggernaut impacts of illimitable quanta exploring from the sun.

One surface always toward the sun and the other away; and on that one, eternal night and — *cold!* Devastating cold such as could freeze courage and put frost on one's thoughts. A world of unchanging whiteness but studded with the frigidly captured beauty of the icy stars. The cold reaches for those stars and it exists in place of air — for the air lies frozen on the ground which has never seen those stars.

Between these two extremes, like a ship's course between Scylla and Charybdis, runs a belt of life — the Twilight Strip, a girdle of immortal dusk between the fury of eternal day and the cold of eternal night. A long, thin place where plants and trees and cities could grow.

There is a liquid softness to the warm air. It flows through the hills and valleys, through the streets of the old town.

Twilight City it is called but it could be old Vienna, Rheims, or picturesque London of some ancient day. Cobbled streets sprawl and turn leisurely through rows of squat, quaint houses, and small shops appear here and there, tended by old couples.

This world is soft and gentle beyond all other planets known to man and its name, Twilight, tells also of something other than a time of day; it is a time of life. The tenderness of its gravital grasp, a little above one half that of Earth's, makes the old young. New life springs through their veins, their hearts labor under lessened strain, and lightened blood ascends unto the brain.

A shop window reflects the grey of your hair as you pass.

Here there is nothing which is new and raw, brash and brassy. No moment-blinding flash of chromium brilliance. No singing commercials. Nothing which is bare and stark, drab and sordid. Here the edge of life is soft and round.

You wander through the streets, light-bodied, light-hearted, drinking in the beauty of it all. The streets are long and cool with evening. Public squares, jewels sewn into the fabric of the town by the twisted threads of streets, appear here and there; and in them, fountains reminisce of rivers they have known. In the open cafes old men sit sipping on old Spanish wines and the song of violins sweetens the air.

You pass small shops and stores. Bakeries with buns and rolls and cakes, delicatessens with meats and spreads. Cobblers' shops, book stores and curio rooms.

You wander on and on, your legs full of the sweet strength of youth.

A child runs past you and then, another. Suddenly, you find yourself listening. Listening to hear words unspoken, sounds unmade. There is only the dreaming silence of the mountains.

You shake your head. Nothing. Just the imagination of the aged; a whisper down the corridors of memory.

The feeling annoys you. It was nothing and yet — like finding a weed in the Garden of Paradise.

Somewhere in the dusky distance someone laughs, and it is enough; your thirst for sound has been quenched.

Twilight. Always twilight. The sun is sinking behind the mountains in the west.

You lie between the warm blankets and white sheets of your bed in your new home. You lie there a long time and sleep does not come. One has to get used to new things, you tell yourself. The excitement of the day, the end of the trip, your new home — no wonder you can't sleep! You explain this to the shadows of the room.

You get up and go to the window. Twilight. The sun is sinking behind the mountains in the west.

Ahhh, now you've found the source of your uneasiness. The never changing twilight. On a cloudy day, you are moody, depressed. Why? Because there is a subtle sense of disorientation. You like the feeling of purpose, of movement, of morning changing to noon to afternoon to evening.

This is the same.

You go back to bed. And think — the children passing you and your listening. You were listening for the sound of their mothers calling them home to supper and to bed. But this was not Earth and there was not evening. It could have been any time of day to them. . . .

Sleep . . .

The alarm rings.

An old, Swiss clock you bought in a musty, little curio shop. Time to get up.

Outside your window, it's twilight. The sun is sinking behind the mountains in the west.

The days pass, or so the clocks, the calendars tell you. But time, subjective time, is frozen delicately in mid-flight.

The valley is an ocean of shadows; shade-tides lap upon the shores of mountains.

The days pass and you idle through picturesque streets and one day you find yourself whistling a tune. An old, old tune that you must have heard in the days of your childhood, perhaps a tune your father hummed when you went walking.

And that decides you. Just like that. The liquid in one's soul may boil for a long time and escape detection but when a certain temperature is reached a

certain change takes place. . . . Your whistle was the whistle of escaping steam.

You pack. You leave your home and the city and buy a return trip ticket at the spaceport, avoiding the eyes of the clerk. You stand with your bags on the edge of the spaceport, not looking at the buildings or the town or the mountains, but upward to the stars to where Earth must lie, the invisible satellite of a golden speck.

How could you tell them, how could you explain to anyone that you are going home because you found yourself whistling, *Back In Your Own Back Yard?*

Could you tell them why this world of unparalleled beauty seemed empty? Could you tell them that you missed the sound of tired, lonely trains moving afar off in the night? Could you tell them that you missed the sight of over-colorful circus posters upon the sides of red brick buildings? And that you missed the sound of rain on the roof and the sound of water running in the gutter?

The ugly, the sordid, that's what you missed. Not only because it was familiar but because, somehow, it complemented the beautiful things. Don't dirty, damp wharves go with the sea-gulls' wheeling flight — and raw, plowed fields with the clear beauty of wind-swept hills?

You stand and wait, watching the stars.

. . . Out of the night, down from the stars, a ship drops, sinking with majestic grandeur through the sky. Pompously, it clears its myriad throats of the phlegm of flame and smoke. It speaks in muted thunder and, suddenly, you know the word which it repeats:

Home, home, home. . . .



Percival Wilde has ventured into many fields of writing, and in each of them he has imparted to his audience a highly individual kind of delight. You may know him through his singularly skillful short plays, through such off-formula but meticulously constructed mystery novels as INQUEST, through that fine series of absurd spoofs portraying the detectival adventures of P. MORAN, OPERATIVE; in each of them you've encountered that special blend of wit and warmth that is Wilde. At least once, some years ago, Mr. Wilde brought those same qualities to the story of fantastic science; and in reviving from "Esquire" this delicacy, as light and airy as its title, we hope at once to please you and to remind the author that here is yet another field in which he may stake out his own unique claim.

The Extreme Airiness of Duton Lang

by PERCIVAL WILDE

"IF I WAS YOU, SIR," said the bartender, "I wouldn't set at that there table in the corner."

"Why not, Charley?"

"It'll cost you money." I mentioned that my sales resistance was excellent, but he shook his head. "You'll get your ears crippled. He can start talking on one drink, and he can keep it up."

"What does he talk about?"

"About an hour or two, sir."

"If I don't like it, I can move away."

"Ah, but you can't, sir! I've heard others that thought they could."

I was incredulous. "Do you mean to say that once I sit down at that table, I won't be able to leave it?"

He nodded emphatically.

That intrigued me, and I glanced about the interior of the little café. The man at the corner table seemed harmless enough; an elderly gentleman, none too well dressed, contemplating an empty glass.

He faced the only vacant chair that remained.

The bartender turned to wait on another customer.

I sauntered to the table and slid into the chair. "If you don't mind . . ."

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"On the contrary; on the contrary."

After that I naturally asked him if he wouldn't have one with me, and he agreed without being urged.

The waiter brought Martinis, and he raised his glass in thoughtful reflection.

"With your permission, sir, a toast: to the memory of Duton Lang."

"I never heard of him, but I'll drink it."

He touched his lips to the rim of the glass with a gesture that was almost religious. "You never heard of Duton Lang?"

"Never."

"A great chemist."

"That may be."

"Who became, at the age of sixty, the world's greatest athlete." His reply was punctuated by sips. "He may yet be alive. Duton was very resourceful. Who knows but what he has discovered some way of extracting nourishment from the air?"

"The air?"

He waved his hand. "The atmosphere, mostly nitrogen, but containing other gases, some of which may have food value."

"Then he isn't dead?"

"Who knows? He was last seen alive at six-thirty yesterday evening."

"Then what makes you think —"

"My dear sir, I greatly doubt if any other man, since the beginning of time, has found himself in a position so excessively harrowing. I am not a scientific man myself, but if you should ask me to guess, I should say Duton exploded before midnight."

"Exploded, did you say?"

He nodded. "Due to lowered barometric pressure — unless he was frozen solid first. Of course the precipitation of dew might have changed his negative to positive gravity; or, as Duton pointed out himself, the curve might become hyperbolic after having passed through the base line. In either event we should hear from him presently." He drained his glass, and I noted for the first time that his cuffs were frayed. "The university would be glad to get him back. So would the reporters. So would I." He set down the glass carefully. "Talking makes me thirsty."

"How about another?"

He nodded again. "I drink Martinis because they were Duton's favorite beverage. Every time I drink one, it is an act of respect to his memory."

"But if you saw him alive yesterday —"

"There is no reason why I should not respect him as soon — and as frequently — as possible."

And this was his story.

Duton Lang [he began] was my dearest friend. We were classmates in high school. We were classmates in college. I went to work when we graduated, but he stayed and took an M.A. and a Ph.D. He became an instructor in the chemistry department. A brilliant man, in no time at all he was an assistant professor.

His book, *The Chemistry of the Benzene Derivatives*, made him famous overnight. He gave me an autographed copy. I treasure it. Some day I shall try to read it. I had never heard of the benzene derivatives, but they led to a most flattering offer from Yale. Then he wrote *On Some Organic Syntheses*. That took him to Princeton at a boost in salary. His lectures were popular. His personality was engaging. He wrote more books. He became head of his department. And then, because every man has his hobby, he became interested in cooking.

You raise your eyebrows? Well, why shouldn't a chemist like to cook? In every home the kitchen is a kind of primitive chemical laboratory. Think what could be done in it if a trained scientist replaced an ignorant servant girl! Duton applied to cooking the brilliant technique he had been thirty years in perfecting. He had spent his sabbatical years in France. He had collected recipes. He improved on them.

You have never tasted his *consommé printanière*. Only a soup, but it was unbelievable. And his eggs *Metternich*. And his *homard à la manière de Duton Lang*. When he wasn't working in his laboratory, he was experimenting in the model kitchen he had installed in his apartment. He used to work in the costume of a chef, "toc" and all. It helped to put him in the proper mood. Have I mentioned that he was a moody man?

I understand that his researches occasionally overlapped. They say that one day, when he was demonstrating before a class in organic chemistry, he emerged from a welter of test tubes, flasks, and what not, to remark with a pleasant smile, "Gentlemen, usually the result of this preparation is nitrodiazobenzene nitrate; but something has gone wrong, for what we have here is clearly — ahem! — *crêpe Suzette*."

What presence of mind! Another man might have been confused — but not Duton. He could always do justice to an occasion. A well-rounded man, interested both in the more serious and in the lighter phases of life, he reached the age of sixty full of honors, and with his digestion unimpaired. His weight was two hundred and fifty-six. His waistline was forty-eight. His disposition was genial. I was proud to call him my friend.

He had been athletic as a young man. He had been a remarkable amateur acrobat. I used to tell him that if he hadn't become famous as a chemist, he would have become equally famous for his triple somersault.

You smile. No, a man who weighs two hundred and fifty-six doesn't think of triple somersaults — or if he does, keeps himself in condition and he never tips the scales so mightily. They seem to be irreconcilables, don't they? But listen!

Duton's weight bothered him like the devil. He tried to diet any number of times, but he couldn't resist the new dishes he invented almost overnight. He wanted to reduce. To give up his regular meals was out of the question. He made up his mind he would synthesize a new chemical which would let him eat as heartily as he pleased, but which would lessen his weight.

Yes, I know other men have tried it. But they didn't have Duton's encyclopedic knowledge. A professor of chemistry and a great cook rolled into one; where could you match that combination? Why, the problem was almost solved before he began. Did he succeed, you ask? That is his tragedy: he succeeded too well.

After eight months of experimentation he had a crystalline powder which he tried on guinea-pigs; then on rabbits. Their weights dropped and they remained healthy. He tried it on cats and dogs. The results were the same. Then he tried it on himself.

He ate a hearty meal, seasoned it with a pinch of the chemical he had synthesized, and was greatly pleased, the next morning, to find that he weighed two hundred and fifty-four. Have I mentioned that his usual weight was two hundred and fifty-six? He ate another hearty meal, added a few grains of "dutonite" — by that time we had given it a name — and dropped to two hundred and fifty flat.

He was radiant. What's that? There's a fortune in it? I knew it, and so did Duton. But he wasn't interested in that angle at all. He wanted it for his own private use. Money meant nothing to him.

He increased the dosage. It stimulated his appetite, he said. At the end of the first week he had lost nine pounds and had never felt better in his life.

He began to lose weight more rapidly. In two weeks he was down to two hundred and thirty-five; and it was then that he made a most astounding discovery.

You agree, perhaps, that it is time to pause and perform an act of respect to his memory?

A Martini, yes. It was Duton's favorite drink, though he never ate the olive.

Duton's discovery was breath-taking. He had lost twenty-one pounds, but his clothes fitted as well as ever. They didn't require alterations of any kind. His waistline was still forty-eight. The legs of his trousers hadn't become too long. It didn't sound reasonable.

He made up his mind the scales were wrong, and he tried others. They agreed. At the end of three weeks he weighed two hundred and twenty-six; at the end of the month, two hundred and seventeen. At the end of two months he was down to a mere one hundred and eighty-one — and his waistline had not shrunk an inch!

I suggested he should stop dosing himself. He did, but kept on losing weight.

It was evident that his system had absorbed so much of the drug that its effects would continue. In December he tipped the scales at less than one hundred and sixty — I don't recall the exact figure. By the first of the year he had dropped to one hundred and thirty. He stripped in my presence — but behind a sheet — at the end of January, and I balanced the scales at ninety-nine. Before February was over he weighed less than seventy pounds, and he was beginning to be worried about himself. He was more than six feet tall; his waistline was still forty-eight; his clothes fitted perfectly; yet he was so light that he could have sat on a child's lap without hurting it. His muscles were firm; his health was better than in years; and I could take hold of him by the elbows and lift him without half trying!

In the middle of March, when he weighed under fifty pounds, I took him to an indoor athletic meet. I thought it would divert him. We watched Pembroke, of Yale, make a new world's record for the high jump. He cleared the bar, if you remember, at six feet, eight and one-half inches.

There was great enthusiasm.

After the meet was over, we joined the crowd which milled about the arena. The bar had been left as it was. Duton gauged its height critically. "Henry," he said to me, "I believe I could jump over that."

Remember, he had been an athlete in his youth.

"Duton," I answered, "why not try it?"

He looked up at the standard, with its handkerchief fluttering a foot over my head. "I think I shall try it."

Some of the undergraduates had overheard us. They controlled their laughter long enough to form a circle and hold back the crowd. Duton had always been one of the most dignified members of the faculty. He was so greatly respected that even when he crouched — so much as a man of his bulk could crouch — twenty feet from the standard, nobody dared snicker.

He had not removed his overcoat or his hat. He still carried his cane. He began to run, with strange, springy steps which carried him high from the ground. He leaped. He rose. He cleared the bar so easily that it was almost ridiculous — and mind you, Pembroke had just broken the world's record.

I'm not going to attempt to describe the scene which followed. The crowd had been ready to laugh. First it gasped; then it went mad. Men screamed. Women fainted. Professor Hargis, of the Latin department, who was standing next to me, remarked, "*Ideo credendum quod incredibile*, but I'm going to have my eyes examined tomorrow."

Duton only said, "I believe I could do it as a standing jump."

They didn't have to make so much room for him this time. He settled his hat firmly on his head. He buttoned his overcoat tightly. He took a firm grip on his cane. He jumped.

Pembroke, who had rushed out half-dressed, was the first to shake his hand. "Professor," he said, "I know I ought to be jealous, but I congratulate you. Nobody can be jealous of the world's greatest athlete."

Duton Lang merely said, "Humph," which was ungracious, and said to me, "Let's be going," which we did, though it wasn't easy for a man of his enormous bulk to wedge his way out through the cheering crowd and the photographers who took flashlight pictures of him every few feet. On the way he stepped on a lady's toe and apologized profusely, but she looked at him in astonishment and said, "It's strange, but it didn't hurt at all."

Well, we debated the case over our Martinis, sitting in these chairs ten minutes later.

I said, "Duton, your name will be in all the papers tomorrow."

He only frowned and answered, "Henry, do you realize that if this continues, I shall weigh nothing in less than sixty days? I have plotted the curve of my weight. I have applied mathematics to it to predict its future. It answers an equation."

"In the meantime, you are champion of the world at both running and standing high jump."

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why not? My muscles are as good as ever." He calculated on a bit of paper, and I remember his precise writing:

$$H = H_0 \frac{256}{X}$$

"If H_0 is the height I could jump originally, and while I never tried, it could hardly have been less than eighteen inches, then that, multiplied by the ratio between my original weight and my present weight gives the height I can jump now. Eight feet should be easy."

His telephone rang almost continuously the next day. His students cheered him when he appeared before them to lecture. The reporters wanted to write him up — naturally. A circus offered him more a month than his professorship paid him a year. The president of a Midwestern university called on the long-distance telephone to inquire if he was actually a member of a faculty, because if not, he would like to offer him a scholarship — and a berth on the track team. He allowed himself, as a concession, to be photographed for *Life*, "chinning" himself with his little finger. Have I mentioned that he could chin himself an incredible number of times?

He weighed less than twenty pounds in April, and he agreed to appear at a monster benefit, the proceeds to go to underprivileged children. At my suggestion he did a standing high jump against the best of the university pole-vaulters. He cleared only thirteen feet at his first attempt, and while the crowd

thought that was wonderful, he confided to me that he had been afraid to let himself go for fear of hitting the roof above.

On his next try he sailed over the bar at fifteen feet with a foot to spare, and pandemonium broke loose. The crowd burst into the arena. Everybody wanted to slap him on the back, to shake his hand, to get his autograph. He didn't mind signing programs with his big gold fountain pen, but he was embarrassed when they hoisted him up on their shoulders and found that he weighed so little.

We left as soon as we could: Duton was a retiring man and didn't like the fuss, and he was getting horribly worried. He said, "As a result of the exercise, I probably lost more weight tonight."

Before I could think what to answer, a gust of wind struck him and almost blew him under the wheels of a passing automobile. The driver screamed, "Hey! Can't you watch where you're going?" and the wind, fortunately, gave an extra puff, and blew him clear over the automobile and out of danger.

In May, less than two weeks ago, I asked him what he weighed.

He said, "I don't know. I won't even look at the scales."

He received the most flattering offers to enter professional athletics. He turned them down. We experimented one night in the university gymnasium, when we could be alone. At his first jump he broke one of the big electric light bulbs set into the ceiling, at least fifty feet from the floor. I caught him when he came down. I was afraid he had hurt himself. He sat on my arm quite gracefully, and his waistline — I believe I've mentioned it, haven't I? — was still forty-eight, and his height over six feet.

He was white with anger. He said, "Henry, put me down this instant."

I did.

He dusted the splinters of broken glass from his hat. He added, "It is humiliating for a full professor of chemistry to sit on a man's elbow, like an infant." Naturally I agreed.

We went to the nearest bar.

Yes — a Martini, please.

We discussed the subject at length. He said, "If the curve becomes hyperbola, and rises after passing through zero, I may be saved. But it is far more likely to be a catenary, and if it is, nothing can be done."

Do you understand that? I didn't.

Ten days ago, John Tomlinson, head of the physics department, experimented on him. Dressed, but without an overcoat, Duton weighed one pound, eight and one-half ounces. Tomlinson asked him to take off his shoes. He did, and floated right up to the ceiling, where he bobbed about like a big balloon, extremely angry, until I threw him a rope and hauled him down.

A few nights later — that was a week ago — he had a nightmare. That would

be the word, though it was real enough when he awoke. He had gone to bed without undressing. He awakened because the mattress seemed hard. He lit a match.

He found himself resting against the ceiling again, with the bed linen hanging straight down — though it seemed to be up — on either side of him. He crawled to the nearest window, and crawled down along the binding of the curtain.

Every day last week he balanced himself in the morning, putting weights into his pockets to make sure he wouldn't leave the earth for good. But yesterday morning he forgot himself while lecturing, banged his hand on the desk, and rose six feet into the air before settling gently on a rack of test tubes — without breaking one of them.

He decided to give up lecturing on the spot.

Snelgrove, the president, didn't want him to quit. He said, "Hang it, Duton, you're one of our biggest drawing cards!"

Duton remembered not to thump the desk, though he was beside himself with anger. He only asked, "Snelgrove, are you running a circus or are you running a university?"

At that moment John Tomlinson came in and suggested more experimentation. I had advised against it, but Duton Lang was a scientist to the core.

He telephoned for me, and we accompanied Tomlinson to the physics laboratory. Duton tied his ankle securely to one beam of a precision balance. He stripped — behind a sheet. Have I mentioned that Duton was a man of the most delicate propriety? And I watched the sheet enveloping the big body rise into the air until Tomlinson attached weights aggregating three pounds, nine and one-half ounces, which exactly balanced the negative gravity.

He said, "Duton, it's the most awful thing in the history of physics," and Duton answered, like a true scientist, "The hell of it is that it has to be in physics, which is your department, and not in chemistry, which is mine."

Tomlinson looked at the swathed figure, swaying easily from side to side, and said, "Duton, I'd like to try a test. The question is whether only you lose weight, or whether objects which come under your influence also lose weight."

Duton answered, "Don't talk like an idiot, John. There are sinkers in my pocketbook, and they weigh as much as ever, thank heaven."

Tomlinson nodded. "But what would happen if you swallowed something — a weight, for example, as you do when you eat?"

"I'm not going to swallow a sinker, even to please you."

"I'm not suggesting that," Tomlinson said hastily, "but I'd like you to drink a measured quantity of water — that is, before you detach yourself from the scales."

Duton was unexpectedly agreeable. "I won't object to that," he said. "It happens I'm thirsty."

We poured out distilled water. Duton was very cooperative, and being a big man, he could hold a lot. He drank six pounds before he decided that would do, and the big body, swathed in the sheet, stood securely on the floor. Tomlinson readjusted the balance while Duton sat on the pan, and found that his positive weight had become two pounds, six and one-half ounces.

Tomlinson crowed, "You see? Exactly as I expected!"

Duton stuck his head out over the top of the sheet and glared at him. "It proves nothing whatever," he declared. "Now I'm going to get dressed. Hand me my clothes."

We couldn't get a word out of him while he put them on — behind the sheet. But there was nothing we could say, was there?

He marched me out of the room. He took my arm. He said, "Henry, I'm distressed. Let's go out into the country."

Well, we went into the subway, and Duton insisted on paying the fares for both of us.

I said, "Duton, this curse may go as suddenly as it came."

He said, "Not unless the curve should become hyperbolic, and my equations all predict the contrary. But don't let's talk about it."

I don't blame him for refusing to talk: the car was full of passengers, and he didn't want to be recognized. He just settled back into his seat and refused to say a word.

We got out at Bronx Park. It was spring. We walked. We had gone only a short distance when we came to a delightful lake. I cannot tell you how bitterly I regret it, but I said, unthinkingly, "Duton, you couldn't jump across that."

"Of course I could jump it," he said.

"It's all of sixty feet, and you've never tried a long jump."

He snorted. "I could do it without half trying. I could do it with a triple somersault thrown into the bargain."

I said, "That would be a remarkable feat," and I wish now I had cut my tongue out first.

He only replied, "It's years since I did a triple somersault."

He buttoned his coat tightly. He jumped. He revolved three times in the air and landed like a feather among the rushes on the other side.

A big policeman, whom neither of us had seen, came running. He blew a whistle and screamed, "Say, stop that! It ain't allowed here!"

Duton became angry: his temper was always short, and besides, he had just performed a feat which no other man could ever duplicate. He actually thumbed his nose at the policeman, and as the policeman, brandishing his club, started to run around the lake toward him, Duton sprang easily into the nearest tree.

The policeman bellowed, "It's against the rules!" and Duton, swinging grace-

fully from a branch forty or fifty feet above the ground, catapulted into another tree.

We raced after him, both of us, while Duton leaped from tree to tree with no visible effort. He could have out-distanced us easily, but he amused himself by keeping just ahead of our pursuit.

He let himself come to the ground eventually at the brink of a waterfall, perching comfortably on a rock, while the policeman and I, unable to climb the vertical sides, stood at the foot of the fall, thirty feet below, with the spray dashing into our faces.

The policeman bellowed, "Come down out of there!" and Duton, whose temper was up, answered, "I'll come down when I'm damned good and ready."

Quite a number of persons had followed us while we ran. They had witnessed Duton's remarkable progress through the trees. They gaped and stared.

The policeman shouted, "I'll give you one minute to come down!" but I took him by the arm and said, "Don't shoot! He's a university professor!"

The policeman glared at me and said, "He acts more like one of them there freshmen."

And then a really terrible thing took place . . . Something unforeseen . . . Something which neither Duton nor I could have included in our calculations . . .

Yes, a Martini would be right.

I have mentioned that Duton was perched at the top of a waterfall. I have also mentioned that he had drunk six measured pounds of distilled water . . .

You know the effect of running water . . .

It is subtle. It is psychological. It is difficult to explain. But even at the distance which separated us, I could see Duton suddenly blush, and I guessed the reason.

Being a man with a delicate sense of propriety, he was trying to control himself—and the water rushed by his very feet, leaping, purling, cascading from rock to rock. I could imagine the struggle that was going on within him. It was titanic; colossal. I felt for him; if I had known an appropriate prayer, I would have repeated it.

Abruptly he said—I could hear it clearly—"Excuse me, Henry," and he turned his back.

I turned my back, also. So did nearly everybody else except the policeman, who had no sense of propriety at all. But I turned around again when I heard a shout and saw Duton rising slowly but certainly from the ground.

He was as surprised as I. He screamed at me, "Henry, I don't understand it."

The limb of a yellow birch overhung the stream. He reached for it and managed to seize its tip. He held on.

I could see from where I stood that with his other hand he was searching his pockets.

He cried out, "Henry, there was a pickpocket in the subway train. My pocketbook is gone."

I called back, "Don't think of money at a time like this. Pull yourself down to the ground."

He answered, "I may be too light without my pocketbook. It was full of sinkers."

I could see, as he had already seen, that the branch to whose outstretched tip he clung was none too strong. I called, "Be careful, Duton! Be very careful!"

The policeman, at the end of his patience, shouted, "The minute's nearly up!"

Duton didn't answer him. He may have been frightened, but his courage was amazing.

He began to inch his way along the branch . . . and a puff of wind hit him and turned him upside down, and his coat, which he had unbuttoned when he searched himself for the pocketbook, fell over his head and arms and enveloped them completely.

I could hear him call out something, but I couldn't make out the words. If he couldn't help himself, there was nothing that anybody could do to help him.

I watched, paralyzed with horror, while objects began to fall out of his pockets: quite a lot of small change, there must have been several dollars' worth; his watch; his eyeglasses; his heavy cigarette case; his keys; finally his big gold fountain pen.

It must have been the last that turned the scales. The branch — it was hardly more than a twig — broke. He was free of all anchorage to the earth. He began to rise more and more rapidly.

He was dignified to the end. I don't know how he did it, but he managed to turn himself into a more conventional position — with his head up and his feet down. He buttoned his coat. He waved the branch to which he still clung as if it were a pointer and the clouds his blackboard.

He said clearly, "The height to which I shall rise will answer the equation $H = \frac{1}{2}(32)t^2$!"

Then he called out suddenly, and they were his last words, "Airplanes, Henry! Airplanes!"

At first I thought that he saw planes; but almost immediately I guessed what was in his resourceful mind. If I could charter an airplane, I could follow him and throw him a rope — and tow him back to earth — to the university — to his chair in the department of chemistry; and of course, once safe again,

he would have lead soles fastened to his shoes, and sinkers distributed all over his person, and would continue a useful and brilliant career, one which might well confound science.

But airplanes are expensive, and the small sums I have been able to collect will not charter one for more than a few minutes.

My dear sir, I am putting it to you as a man and a brother: will you open your heart and your pocket? Will you give, give till it hurts, to help my unfortunate friend, Duton Lang?

"Well," inquired the bartender, "did he talk your ear off like I said he would?"

"I didn't mind," I said, still dazed.

"Did he get anything out of you?"

"Four bits —"

"Ah!"

"And five Martinis."

"He told you about his friend who got heavier and heavier, until he ended up by sinking right through the earth?"

"On the contrary," I said, much startled. "His friend's trouble seemed to be quite the opposite."

"Did it?" said the bartender. "The opposite? Well, any story that sells five drinks is a good story."

Note:

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Like all writers (at least in jacket blurbs and introductions), Ford McCormack has sampled most other professions known to man. This Seattle-bred resident of Los Angeles tells us that he has spent life since his teens as "a dilettante writer and jack-of-all-trades (all but two, in strict honesty; never cared for millinery and was too large for a jockey)." That those trades included necromancy he indicates in this unusually vivid and freshly convincing treatment of the classic pact-with-the-Devil situation; only firsthand acquaintance could produce so detailed a study of human evil — and of the true nature of Satan's contracts.

?

by FORD MCCORMACK

"I DO BELIEVE," said Satan, "that you are about the youngest scoundrel I have ever had the pleasure of calling upon."

I remember staring at him in speechless fascination. I was sprawled on my bed, where I had been making a half-hearted attempt to study the lessons I had neglected for weeks. And there he was, sitting at ease in my Morris chair.

Beyond any doubt, I knew who it was. Yet, try as I will, I cannot resurrect any clear image of his appearance on that occasion, for he looks quite different to me now. And the explanation is simple: I myself have changed.

When you look upon the Lord of Darkness — as perhaps you will — you behold all that is evil in yourself. Try to imagine, not a creature with horns and cloven hoofs, but a being both glamorous and revolting, whose shape and countenance, whose clothing or the lack of it, whose every gesture and expression, suggest precisely what your inmost mind conceives to be unholy.

That, or its equivalent, was what confronted me in my room on that remote afternoon.

"But it's mainly a business call," Satan went on abruptly. "I've come to make a bargain with you."

A bargain — a pact with the Devil! I had read of such a thing, but I hadn't really thought — I certainly hadn't expected —

"Why not?" Satan challenged my thoughts. "It isn't so much your experience of evil that counts — it's your aptitude for it. At sixteen, you show more downright talent for wickedness than most hardened criminals."

I recall feeling a little giddy at such eminent recognition. But Satan made a casual gesture.

"You needn't feel quite so flattered. I'm not referring to the harebrained car-stealing episode that all but landed you in the reformatory. A criminal record can be a serious handicap.

"No, I have in mind a number of activities which you have wisely never revealed to anyone. I know, for instance, what really happened to your cousin Preston on that hike along the river. Ah, yes, and that little matter involving Mrs. Bonniwell's cat." Satan smiled. "Truly fiendish! . . . Well — need I say more?"

I shook my head, a little breathless. Somehow, I managed to find my voice:

"But — a pact — that means I give you my soul in exchange for — a charmed life, or something — doesn't it?"

Satan snorted. "Medieval nonsense! What's your idea of a charmed life — or did you ever stop to think?"

"Why — it's when nothing can hurt you, no matter what you do, or what danger you're in —"

"For how long?"

"Well, all your life, I suppose — that is, until — well . . ."

"Until you die of old age? You'd be surprised what effect that kind of deadline has on even the worst humans. I've tried it. They invariably turn holy and try to squirm out of it. Of course, they never succeed, and I get my price — so what? Nine chances out of ten, I'd have got the soul in question anyhow, and in the meantime I've tied up several of my best operators for years, during which they could have been undoing a lot of good. Instead, they have to stay on the alert constantly, in order to stymie some of the most elaborate and ingenious efforts at self-destruction ever devised.

"Besides," Satan went on, "there's no shortage of souls, these days — I get far more than I can give personal attention to, anyway. But there is one type I've never managed to get quite enough of — can you guess what it is?"

I shook my head.

"Operators," was the answer. "Or demons, as they were once popularly called. The boys that carry on the bad work. Eligible material isn't keeping up with the population increase."

"Why?"

"Rule Seventeen: Regarding any candidate for appointment as malevolent agent, it must be established that at the time of mundane demise, no trait of character could be ascribed to him which, in the judgment of his fellow men, would be deemed a virtue." Satan made a wry face. "Now, you'd be surprised how few arrivals can qualify, these days — at a time, strangely enough, when the quota is at an all-time high.

"Some of that few," he went on bitterly, "I lose on a mere technicality. Take the case of a recent consignee I had set great store by. He was a thorough-going blackguard who had just completed, on the gallows, a career of distinguished corruption. But it turned out that he had been kind to his children.

"Now, it wasn't that he really liked children as such; he merely saw his own as reflections of himself, which was true, to a certain extent — I shall probably get them all, eventually. But to his typically shallow-minded neighbors, being kind to anybody is a virtue, whatever the reason. And there was no deceptive intent on his part; if there had been, nobody else's opinion would have counted. As it was, one vestige of his soul remained white, and he was disqualified. I tell you, that quibbling decision burned me up — almost as much as it did him!"

I was beginning to grasp the general idea, I thought. But the prospect was so magnificent that I hardly dared allow my mind to dwell upon it, nor phrase the question I longed to ask.

Nor did I need to. I had forgotten — or had not fully realized — that the Lord of Darkness can read the minds of mortals.

He nodded slowly. "That is my offer. If you can qualify, you will become a full-fledged operator, after your earthly death. In that capacity, you will find plenty of opportunity for the sport you love best — making trouble. Subject, of course, to my orders. What do you say?"

Excitement constricted my throat, and I had to swallow to free it. "Yes! Oh, yes sir! That would be swell!"

"Mind you," said Satan sharply, "you can't afford to make any mistakes. You're still mortal and can die at any time, accidentally or otherwise. If that happens, and there's a single white mark against you — well, there'll be the Devil to pay."

I felt supremely confident. My apprenticeship would be successful, all right. And after that I would be endowed with superhuman powers — black magic and such!

"Yes," I said firmly. "It's a deal! Do you want my signature, in — uh — blood?"

"Get those old-fashioned notions out of your head!" said Satan without rancor. "I've told you it's not what you do, it's your intentions that count. Incidentally, I expect you to get busy on your schoolwork. I can't abide ignorant assistants! I'll leave you now, but you may summon me at any time merely by wishing it — just don't abuse the privilege, as I am very busy these days. Any questions? . . . No? . . . Then, au revoir!"

The next instant, bright sunlight dazzled my eyes. While we had been talking, the sun had changed position, and now shone through the window full in my face.

But why had I not noticed it before?
The Morris chair was empty.

Satan's sound advice notwithstanding, I accomplished very little on my schoolwork that day. During the next week or so, however, I was able to catch up on all my lessons. As the means to an infinitely desirable end, they no longer seemed onerous.

But in other respects, I was a little slow in launching my chosen career — or rather in furthering it, since I had already been officially credited with a fair start. While my "pact" — as I liked to think of it — had given me a thrilling objective in my earthly life, it had also introduced a new and serious consideration: risk.

Gradually, I learned to distinguish between truly evil impulses and merely reckless ones, and found that the former could, with cunning, usually be acted upon in such a way as not to jeopardize life or freedom. An episode which occurred not long before my graduation from high school resolved the last of my confusion, and pointed clearly to a *modus operandi* that was nearly fool-proof.

The affair concerned the class president, a boy of noble character, who had been waylaid in a dark place, knocked semi-conscious with a club, and badly beaten. He had caught only a glimpse of his assailant, by the light of a distant street-lamp, and had somehow acquired the notion that it was me.

In the principal's office the next day, he gradually changed his mind. After all, as the principal pointed out, the two of us were barely acquainted — neither friends nor enemies.

"Can you imagine," the principal concluded his argument, "what earthly reason Robert could have had for doing such a thing?"

The class president was obliged to admit that he couldn't. And they were both right.

It wasn't an earthly reason.

Thinking the matter over that evening at home, I realized that I had made an important discovery. Although I would have phrased it differently then, the essence of it was this:

Just as the most irresistible form of benefaction is altruism, or that which seeks no reward, so does evil-doing achieve its greatest potency when it takes no thought of revenge or material gain. For demonstrable motivation is the cornerstone of criminology.

And with that thought came the realization of what my profession — the preliminary, or earthly, one — would be. I would become a criminal lawyer. As such, I could kill two birds with one stone: get rich helping guilty people escape punishment. I toyed delightedly with the idea for a while, then turned

with renewed purpose to my studies. I was pretty well up on them, but final exams were just around the corner.

At that moment I became aware that I was not alone.

I was a little startled at beholding Satan again. It was not, I recall, that there had been any major alteration in his appearance, but rather a number of minor ones, as if some modeler in clay had shifted the emphasis by a few deft pats and pinches, sharpening a feature or an expressive line of the countenance here and there, and subtly distorting the bodily contours. The result was a masterly — and somewhat disturbing — image of what my soul had now become.

And then he smiled, indescribably, but in such a way as to send a tingle along my nerves.

"Yes," he nodded, "I have changed, and, by the same token, so have you. The picture in your mind shows that you have made definite progress. And the fundamental principle you discovered this evening should be very useful to you."

I frowned. "If you knew that, why didn't you tell me about it before?"

"Because, like many principles, it has more significance when you are able to figure it out for yourself. Incidentally, I like your tentative choice of a profession. But it will be several years before you can engage in it. In the meantime, there is the problem of your parents. That is what I came to warn you about."

"Warn me?"

"Yes. Although you have been successfully eradicating other virtues, your esteem for your mother and father, while less than devotion, is holding fairly steady. And you seem almost unaware of the possible consequences. Frankly, I had not anticipated any such difficulty — particularly since they are only foster-parents, and have by their own standards done a miserable job of raising you."

I was stung. "There's a reason for that! As you probably know, my father has been in poor health for years, and my mother spends most of her time taking care of him. Outside of that, they've always treated me as if I were —" I broke off in some confusion, aware that Satan was regarding me with sardonic surprise.

"Spoken like any member of the Opposition!" he said, after a moment. "The matter is more serious than I had thought. I am quite aware, thank you, that ingratitude is a sin. And believe me, I have known for a long time that charity begins at home. It follows that if charity is to be nipped in the bud, home is the place to do it. But I have no time to argue with you. If you're going to let such trifling and temporal considerations as filial piety stand in the way of *permanent* objectives, the choice is yours."

Satan finished soberly: "Think it over, my boy. I don't need to tell you that you're already in pretty deep, and — well, I'd rather be your boss than your keeper. But now, I have business elsewhere, so —"

"Wait!" My voice was so loud that I jumped, suddenly aware that my parents downstairs thought I was alone.

"Don't worry," said Satan. "Even the stupidest of my operators knows the simple spell necessary to soundproof a room. With me, it's automatic."

Despite his reassurance, I went on in hushed tones: "What would I have to do — kill them?"

"I'm making no recommendations," Satan returned casually. "You're supposed to be winning your own spurs, remember. Murder would, of course, eclipse any pre-existing kind feelings — even if, as in your case, they were pretty strong. Ordinarily, complete indifference to the fate of one's parents would be sinful enough."

"But — but how could I be sure I really didn't care what happened to them?"

Satan shrugged. "How, indeed? That, I must emphasize, is your problem. If you'll excuse me, I shall be off. There has been a severe earthquake in Chile, and I must get up a crew to delay the arrival of the relief busybodies."

Again, I accomplished very little in the way of studying that evening, after Satan had left, but this time it was for a quite different reason.

My parents did not attend the graduation exercises, since my father was in one of his low periods of health, and my mother disliked to leave him. On that day, I began to see that there was some truth — which even the Devil can speak — in the accusations he had leveled against them. They could at least have hired a nurse to stay with my father while my mother attended the exercises. In fact, they were sufficiently well off to have afforded one during the several years of my father's illness, if my mother had been much concerned with her duties to a mere foster-child.

Two or three days later I was coming home from the drugstore, after replenishing my father's supply of a long-standing prescription, when a sudden thought stopped me in my tracks. Retiring to the privacy of some nearby shrubs, I unwrapped the vial carefully and shook some of the tablets into my hand. Yes, they looked for all the world like ordinary aspirin!

I had no idea what they really were, beyond hearing my father say semi-jokingly that they were all that kept him alive. But I knew they could be nothing like aspirin, which my father reacted to strongly and had been specifically warned against.

After about an hour of aimless walking, I stopped by a different drugstore before going home. . . .

My father succumbed so readily, I was somewhat shocked to discover how delicate his health had actually been. Plainly, I had had a narrow escape. He could easily have died at almost any time, leaving me with a dangerous amount of affection for him.

Although the doctor was not particularly surprised at his patient's sudden turn for the worse, he methodically had the prescription analyzed. But I had anticipated him there, and the bottle was found to contain the right kind and number of tablets. My father had taken his last aspirin almost twenty-four hours before his death, so that even an autopsy, had one been ordered, would probably have revealed nothing.

My mother was quite literally inconsolable: her grief remained undiminished even after a long time. In view of my father's fragile health when living, this was an unrealistic attitude, which inevitably began to affect her mental stability. It also showed clearly how secondary had been my own status in her esteem.

She became totally insane about the time I graduated from law school, and my first legal case was to have her declared incompetent to administer what was left of my father's estate after the considerable expense of my education. I then had her committed to a suitable institution. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that she belonged there.

For I had taken the precaution of telling her what really happened to my father.

In another year I had a going law practice, complete with useful political connections, and was maintaining a fair batting average of acquittals. Privately, of course, I regarded as favorable decisions those which convicted innocent clients. I took such cases only where they appeared sufficiently hopeless to be lost without obvious bungling on my part, which would have been injurious to my reputation.

It was about this time that I began to have difficulties with my mistress. Martha Torrance was no ordinary kept woman, but a girl of reputable family whom I had met while attending law school. I had reduced her to the present status by a long process of attrition, including the promise of marriage. Now that I had graduated and established a practice, it had become hard to find excuses for further delay of the nuptials.

There came the day of her ultimatum, and I was inclined to believe she meant it. Quite simply, she gave me the choice of setting a definite date for the wedding or walking out of her life.

The latter alternative was out of the question. In the first place, there was little doubt that I was somewhat fond of her, which for me was an inadvisably wholesome way to wind up the affair. Then, too, I was not at all sure I had cor-

rupted her sufficiently that she would continue an immoral existence. I was obliged to set a date, as far ahead as possible, and to hope that in the meantime some dishonorable solution would suggest itself.

A few days later, in a flash of inspiration, one did. It would necessitate going through with the marriage and remaining in that status for some time, but as a culminating act of villainy, it would be well worth the trouble.

My plan called for a male third party, and at once I culled the list of my acquaintances for a man to suit the role. I selected a personable bachelor named Douglas Wakefield, and began to cultivate him. He became a close enough friend, during the next few months, to officiate as best man at my wedding. By this time, I was confident that I could not have made a better choice. Doug Wakefield was attractive to women, but seemed to have a fairly strict code of ethics regarding them. And Martha liked him.

I let several months go by before I considered that the time was ripe, and shortly thereafter the perfect opportunity presented itself. I found myself one morning with little to do for the rest of the day, the result of an uncontrived lull in my business affairs. Then, as I sat in my private office, mentally reviewing the steps of my infamous plan, it suddenly dawned on me that I was actually reluctant to go through with the thing!

After the first shock of surprise at my own weakness, I thought I understood the basis for my feeling. It was simply the recognition that the deed I contemplated would amount to a final commitment, placing me far beyond any conceivable hope of redemption. Not, of course, that there was much hope anyway.

The possibility that Satan, who was reputed to have tricked many mortals, might be tricking me was ruled out by due consideration. It made sense that he needed help, that the mushrooming population of earth called for an expansion of his staff. It did not make sense that he would waste his chicanery on what could be termed a cinch deal: the mere acquisition of my soul. No, here was my chance to complete my qualification for an eternal job of mischief-making, and I had delayed overly long already.

I flipped the toggle-switch on the interoffice communicator and called my secretary for dictation. My secretary, incidentally, was an attractive but not very capable young lady of rather high morals. I was paying her so handsomely that for the first time she was able to take adequate care of her widowed mother. Jobs were getting scarce, and I expected to have a new mistress soon.

As she sat waiting, her pretty face showing the usual strain of unlimbering her incompetent shorthand, I said casually:

"By the way, I feel a little sluggish today — I've been thinking an afternoon of golf might help. Get Mr. Wakefield on the phone and I'll ask him to join me."

Fortunately, Doug had not yet gone to lunch, and a minute later I was receiving his courteous refusal:

"Gosh, I'd like to, Bob, but I've got a dozen calls to make today. I thought you knew my busiest time is in the afternoon — on weekdays, at least. How about Saturday?"

We made it tentative for Saturday and said goodbye. So far so good: I now had a witness to the fact that Douglas Wakefield thought I was going to the country club that afternoon. I had known, of course, that he wouldn't accept. He was district sales manager for a chain of stores and did a lot of field work, mostly in the afternoons.

After dictating a short letter, I sent my secretary to lunch. When she had gone, I phoned Martha and told her I was a little indisposed — nothing serious — and would be home before long. I was fairly sure she had not planned to go out; now it was certain she would be there.

Twenty minutes later, I called the café where Douglas Wakefield was accustomed to eat lunch. Keeping my voice just light enough so the waitress could not later swear whether it was that of man or woman, I asked for Mr. Wakefield. He was there.

"Doug," I said. "I just got home, and — something has happened. I don't want to talk about it over the phone, but can you come right over? And don't mention it to anybody, please."

I had known that I could probably count on him to answer such a mystifying summons without insisting on further information, but his response was even better than I expected.

"I'll be right there," he said after a short pause, and hung up.

It would not have mattered too much if my secretary had not returned promptly from lunch, but she did. I contrived a slightly haggard expression.

"I've changed my mind about golf," I told her. "I'm not feeling so well. I believe I'll just go home and take it easy."

She looked concerned. "Do you think you ought to drive? I'll be glad to —"

"Oh, no! I'll be all right. I haven't even called my wife — it'll be soon enough for her to start worrying when I get there."

Driving homeward in my car, I chuckled over the ambiguity of that last remark, which had set the stage completely. Yes, my simple little plan was ticking off nicely. Any jury in the world would unquestionably agree that Martha and Douglas were guiltier than I, and would secretly scoff at the purely negative evidence to the contrary. Even I, as my own lawyer, could get myself off with a few years' imprisonment, at most — and I intended to be better represented than that.

While waiting for a traffic signal, I took out the revolver I had kept in the

glove compartment for a long time — and for which I had a permit — checked it to reassure myself it was fully loaded, and slipped it in my coat pocket.

I approached my home slowly from a side street off the direct route from town. Although Doug had started perhaps ten minutes earlier, he had had farther to come than I, and might not have arrived yet.

Then I saw his car. It was parked — rather brazenly, people would say — in front of my house. I pulled up two doors away and hurried in, lest I should be seen by the “paramours” and confronted in an unclandestine way on my own front porch.

Doug and Martha were standing in the living room as I entered. He was still holding his hat in his hand. They really made a handsome, if surprised, couple. Of course, the police would find them in a more disheveled — and compromising — pose.

Just now, their faces showed mixed feelings, in which bafflement seemed to predominate. I had to admit that for them it would be a puzzling situation. But I had no intention of wasting time with explanations based on mere braggadocio, and taking the risk of spoiling a perfect set-up. I simply drew my revolver, aimed carefully at Douglas Wakefield and fired. I then turned my attention to Martha, who stood transfixed, evidently trying to scream.

It was then that the unexpected happened. By a sort of acquired instinct, I had shot Doug in the stomach, so that he would die not instantly but in great pain. That was where I made my mistake. As I shot Martha through the heart, to avoid any suspicious repetition, I saw Doug straighten from his convulsion of agony, and pull something shiny from the belt of his trousers. I had no time to stop him, nor in fact to do anything but wonder vaguely why he, too, should have been carrying a gun. There was a burst of pain within me — I was not even sure just where — and I blacked out.

My next conscious awareness was of standing naked in an immense cavern before the Throne of Hell.

Sitting upon it was a creature so appalling in its hideousness that for a moment I failed to identify it. And then, as my eyes became accustomed to the reddish light which suffused the great chamber, every lineament of the gargoyle-like figure began to convey subtle meaning.

The modeler, the Master Caricaturist — and I was beginning to suspect who that might be — had outdone himself. Here was no bestial symbolism, such as confuses mere animalism with true depravity; every detail of this foul simulacrum was intensely human. And, in its idiomatic way, acutely familiar.

Yet the very frightfulness of what I saw was, in a sense, reassuring. After all, *I was a candidate*. Surely, there could be no question —

“None whatever!” Satan’s voice boomed hollowly in the cavern. I found

myself impaled by those insanely staring eyes, and below them the bloated, grinning lips moved again: "I am delighted to report that you passed the test with a single flying color — black!"

He was toying with what seemed to be two small and slimy animals on his lap. They growled continually. Other than that the silence became lengthy. I grew a little impatient.

"Well," I said brusquely, but my voice sounded thin in the vast room, "what do I do now?"

Satan smiled crookedly. "There are no formalities. Consider yourself on duty. I'll even give you your first assignment here and now. It is to remove these playthings from my lap and dispose of them. They no longer amuse me."

I was puzzled. "What are they — imps?"

"No." The leer on that ghastly countenance grew broader. "Come closer."

Hesitantly, I walked toward him. And — strangely — I seemed to get no nearer, at first. Then, with a shock, I realized the truth. The throne was at least a hundred feet away, and Satan was — huge!

I had assumed, on the basis of our earlier meetings, that his present size was no greater than my own, and the odd glow of this place had preserved the illusion. The monster confronting me, if erect, would have stood twelve or fourteen feet high.

Sitting, he was imposing enough, but I strode on to the very base of the rough-carved platform under him. Mere size, I told myself, was of no importance.

Yet the burning gaze of those mad eyes was hard to take, pointblank. I looked at the two squirming things on his great thighs. They also appeared proportionately larger, and not quite so shapeless. I could see now why they had looked so slimy. They were, to all appearances, masses of entrails, very much like those of humans. I had the sudden impression that here were two living human beings turned wrong side out! What I had interpreted from a distance as growling was now recognizable as muffled screams issuing from their involuted throats.

"Amazing!" I gasped. "I wouldn't have thought it could be done!"

"As a matter of fact, it's anatomically impossible," said Satan, "but that's no limitation here." He plunged his misshapen hands into the two slithering masses, felt around briefly, and gave a sharp jerk. Instantly, two complete human beings sat on his knees like a pair of ventriloquists' dummies, and the combined volume of their shrieking became ear-splitting. I noticed with a start that one of them was a woman, and then, despite their contorted faces and wide-open mouths, I recognized them both — Martha and Douglas!

As I stood there stupefied, Satan rocked and drooled with harsh laughter, raising a bedlam of echoes. And when he subsided, there was silence. Although

Martha and Douglas were obviously still screaming at the top of their lungs, the sound of it had in some fashion been suppressed. I was glad of that much, at least.

"Does this mean —" I faltered.

Satan nodded. "They had been having an affair for months. But the infinitely amusing part of it is that they were going to tell you about it, and ask for a divorce. Douglas was afraid you had found out, when you made your mysterious request, which was the reason he brought a gun for protection, just in case. But if you had delayed the shooting as much as a minute, they would have confessed everything. And that —" Satan gave vent to a bubbling chuckle — "that would have tied your hands! Do you see the supreme irony of it? That would have told you there was a modicum of justice in what you intended to do, and you wouldn't have dared to do it!"

After another interval of more restrained but equally derisive mirth, he sobered somewhat. "Of course," he said, "I wouldn't really have preferred it to happen that way. As it works out, you have increased my inventory by two souls who, if left among the living, might have turned penitent and escaped me. Not to mention the advantage of having your services available at this time, when I need you — as it were — badly."

I had begun to collect my scattered wits. "And that's why you didn't tell me about the affair! I presume you were aware of it all along?"

Satan bowed sardonically. "I contrive to keep posted on most such matters."

Oddly, at that moment I felt less resentment toward Satan than I did toward my guilty wife and supposed friend. The Devil had at least behaved true to form. But they —

"What did you mean," I asked, "when you said you wanted those two disposed of?"

"Oh — the usual thing. Fling them into the Fiery Pit."

"Fling them? I'm fairly husky, but —"

"You now," Satan pointed out, "have the strength of a demon. Here, catch!" And with an easy motion, he sent the writhing body of Douglas Wakefield flying through the air toward me. I stepped aside but caught an arm as he went past. Surprisingly, I was able to stop him with ease, and he felt light as a kitten. It was child's play to put an end to his struggles by pinioning all four limbs against his torso, and to tuck him under my arm.

Martha came next, and I gathered her up in similar fashion. This was going to be fun.

"Now, where in Hell," I inquired almost cheerfully, "might the Fiery Pit be?"

"In Hell," was the immediate rejoinder, "things are arranged — and re-

arranged — to suit my convenience. Just now, the Pit is right behind you.”

As he finished speaking, I became aware of an intense wave of heat at my back, and the smell of burning sulphur stung my nostrils. At the same time, the low roaring of a mighty holocaust filled the air. I turned and all but fell over the edge of an enormous chasm. Its walls were hundred-foot precipices, perhaps a quarter of a mile apart and of unguessable length. Its floor was a glowing, changing mass of coals, seen through flickering tongues of blue and orange flame. The effect was that of a wide underground river of fire.

Faintly audible in the steady muttering of the flames, there was an incessant chorus as of human wailing. Looking closely, I saw a moving figure on the bed of coals below. And another — and several more. Then, as my eyes became more accustomed to the fierce glare, I could distinguish them everywhere, most of them creeping slowly, and I realized it had been partly the random motion of these hundreds of creatures which had lent a seething aspect to the entire surface.

They were all human — or had been — and as I watched, it became clear that their continual crawling, which had seemed aimless, was not without purpose, after all. The general motivation was quite simple: to get to a cooler spot. Here and there, places could be seen where the coals merely smouldered or were black. The nearest dozen humans would inch their way to one of these thermal islands, all reaching it at about the same time, when it would promptly flare into searing brightness. With anguished shrieks, the cluster of souls would begin the frantic but feeble dispersal toward other points only slightly less unendurable.

There was a sort of dynamic simplicity about the set-up that I had to admire. And, I thought grimly, it was just the place for Douglas and Martha.

At that moment, my gloating was interrupted by what could only have been a huge foot planted between my shoulder blades, for I felt its toes against the back of my head. Hampered as I was, I had no chance to save myself, and the next instant a powerful thrust sent me headlong over the brink.

Plummeting toward the fiery depths, I relinquished my human burdens, and they went their separate ways, limbs flailing. It was the last glimpse I ever had of Douglas and Martha. And then I struck the bed of coals, with a wrenching impact that would have knocked out or killed any living mortal instantly.

But in Hell, there is no unconsciousness, nor any other means of alleviating pain — and, obviously, there is no death. The shifting coals broke my fall sufficiently so that of all my bones only two ribs cracked. But I was not even aware of that minor injury at the time. For over my entire body, the skin was blistering and peeling away, and I was engulfed in a tidal wave of agony.

Convulsively, I scrambled to my feet and staggered toward the wall a few

feet away, falling twice before reaching it. But its glazed and scorching surface was nearly unbroken, offering no real hand-holds whatever. Along it on both sides of me, other humans were stretching up their arms to clutch at every tiny crevice, but none had managed to lift himself clear of the flames, which seemed to leap more furiously here than elsewhere.

And — half-blinded though I was — I must have noticed a certain odd fact at that moment, since I remembered it later: While my own skin and part of my flesh was charring and smoking acridly, the others seemed to have no worse than a mild first-degree burn all over. Yet their gasping screams indicated their anguish could not be much less than mine.

My groping fingers found a small crack in the wall over my head and I found to my amazement that I was able to raise myself a little. Frantically, with fingers and toes, I searched for other holes, and presently I had climbed precariously out of reach of the flames. But it had taken the full measure of my newly-acquired, demoniac strength, plus the utmost desperation, to accomplish it. I was seemingly beyond exhaustion; my body felt as if it were bathed in lye. And the mere act of clinging there was taking a further toll.

It was not will-power alone that sustained me through the rest of that climb. Only the tenacity born of consuming hatred could have done it. Hatred toward all the beings of Heaven, Hell and between — but, toweringly, hatred toward the sardonic Prince of Fiends who had done this to me!

By any standard, it must have taken me a long time to reach the top. And when I finally pulled myself over the rim and lay prone, still fully conscious but unaware of anything other than the pain and weariness which permeated me, it seemed that I had used up a great slice of eternity.

But I was not to be left alone for long. After an all-too-brief interval, I felt a mashing weight on my back. It moved irresistibly, rolling me over twice, then lifted. In sudden panic, I raised myself on all fours and looked around, sickened by the fresh agony of the effort. But I was no longer near the Pit — in fact, it was nowhere to be seen. The object that had rolled me over had apparently been Satan's gargantuan foot; it was stretching out toward me again, threateningly.

"Get up!" was his rasping command, and he went on ironically: "Perhaps that little lesson will teach you to carry out my orders more promptly."

A surge of anger brought me, swaying, to my feet.

"Promptly!" I croaked. "But you — you —" I broke off, incoherent with rage. I had been about to point out that he himself had engaged freely in the conversation after giving those orders, that there had been no intimation of any penalty for delay, and that —

Then I saw that Satan was reading my thoughts, for he was nodding his head and grinning horrendously. He spoke with slow emphasis:

"Unfair, isn't it?"

The simple remark was like a physical blow, because of its tremendous implications. It was then that I truly felt the cold, tightening grip of ultimate despair.

"And yet," Satan said complacently, "it is amazing how little downright falsehood it was necessary to use on you. You were fairly gullible — and of course if I can make the partial truth serve my ends, it always enhances the deception. At no time did I guarantee that you would *like* the job, when you got it, or that you would not suffer. The presumption that you could come here with your soul completely black and escape punishment required a minimum of suggestion on my part, and a maximum of wishful thinking on yours. Actually, the tortures in store for you are considerably more intense and diversified than those of the run-of-the-mill damnees in the Pit, who, as you noticed, are conditioned for permanent residence therein. You will forever undertake to do my bidding, and my bidding will invariably be more than you can do. And the woe which shall betide you when you fail to do it does not compare with that which shall follow when you fail to try."

Satan paused, and the great foot advanced significantly again, for I had slumped to my knees in pain and utter dejection. With excruciating effort, I managed to get my seared and swollen feet under me again.

"And now," Satan went on, "it is time you met some of your colleagues. They are all very busy, but I have called in several of them anyhow. Since they are aware that this will mean extra punishment for neglecting their various assignments, they should be delighted to make your acquaintance."

As he spoke, there were stirrings in the dim, red shadows of the cavern; now vague shapes began to emerge. They drew nearer, becoming more distinct, and

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in spite of my preoccupation with the undiminished torment of my flesh, I shuddered. For any one of them was the horrid equal of Satan, and there were at least a dozen.

No two of them were alike. Each was the cunning caricature of an unspeakably vile human soul; a few made the guise of Satan look almost ingenuous. But there was one striking difference: none of them was smiling. Instead, despair and suffering were written indelibly on each visage, though without altering its essential evil. This eloquent expression, as much as their combined repulsiveness, made the sight of them unbearable, and I closed my aching eyes.

As if it were a signal, they all rushed me at once; I was caught completely off guard. The next instant I was down, crushed by the onslaught of a group of which each member was, for the time being, stronger than myself. And — I quickly discovered — much more vicious. They clutched and gouged at every part of my already excoriated body, yet with uncanny precision seemed to seek out the most sensitive spots. And the small part of my mind that was not exploding with pain was paralyzed with horror, not so much at the likelihood of being torn apart, but at not being able to die when it happened.

Suddenly, incredibly, the attack ceased, and within seconds I was left lying there alone. But the agony lingered, and in fact had hardly lessened when Satan's inexorable foot rolled me over again. This time, he was obliged to plague me at length before I could so much as raise my head.

"I had to send them away," he observed casually. "They were beginning to enjoy themselves. Such pleasures as tearing people to bits I reserve for myself — unless some of the boys take a notion to gang up on you behind my back, as sometimes happens to rookies. In that case, your punishment would be double, both for providing them with amusement and for giving me the trouble of putting you back together. Your only insurance is never to close your eyes,

.....

TITLE CONTEST COUPON

{ My title for Ford McCormack's story in the June issue is: }

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not even for sleep — which, of course, you will crave with increasing desperation.

"Nonetheless, I think you will contrive to keep them open, somehow, in spite of the fact that the aspect of your co-workers will grow ever more loathsome to your sight. For in all creation, you could not find so despicable a crew of backbiting stool-pigeons as that which you have joined. Each of them, incidentally, sees me as a replica of himself, except for size. Henceforth, the same will apply to you. When at long last your flesh has healed recognizably, you will look exactly as you see me now. And since the sight of yourself will be most revolting of all, you will avoid reflecting surfaces everywhere — but you cannot avoid me.

"By that time, you will have been introduced to other and more deadly forms of mental suffering. And you will find that, just as you cannot die to end physical pain, so also the escape of insanity is denied you"

There was more — more that Satan said on that occasion, and much more that I have learned since. But time is running short. Fortunately the full meaning of the phrase "behind my back," with its implication that Satan does not perpetually concern himself about the doings of each and every henchman, did not occur to me until an hour ago. Since then, his attention has remained elsewhere, otherwise this story could not reach you, the reader. There is still the chance that it may not.

I am relating this account into the wire-recorder of a hack writer who has fallen asleep at his work. He will know how to go about getting it published, and since he apparently has a tendency to live beyond his means, he will undoubtedly be anxious to do so. He will, of course, take full credit for its authorship, and may even leave these concluding comments as they stand, if he thinks they will make him appear more clever. But that is of no importance to me. I shall be satisfied if, somewhere, a single candidate reads my story. For he will understand, and take warning.

And if you are that one, let there be no mistake. I am utterly, irrevocably evil, and I detest all human beings, including you. It is only the thought of frustrating my dread Master, whom I hate far more, that makes me tremble with eagerness to betray him in this fashion.

I shall now backwind this spool of wire to the point where Satan's deception is revealed, start it playing forward, and turn the volume up loud. That should wake the writer, and once a mortal has heard my tale, Satan will be helpless to suppress it. But he will, of course, strain his ingenuity to reward me suitably.

Whatever he does, one thing is ironically certain: I won't lose my job.

Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

MAGAZINE deadlines come early, and books for review come late; so inevitably much of this column must be devoted to catching up with fantasy publishing in 1950.

At least one belatedly received item should have appeared on the "Best of 1950" list in our last issue: Robert A. Heinlein's *FARMER IN THE SKY* (Scribner's). Published as a juvenile, this magnificently detailed study of the technological and human problems of interplanetary colonization was just about the only *mature* science fiction novel of the year. To be sure, this would have meant no less than three Heinleins on the "Best" list, but who's counting? The fact remains that Heinlein, even when writing for (but never "down to") a juvenile audience, makes most of his nominally adult competition look like continuity writers for the Buck Rogers strip.

Parts of Isaac Asimov's *I, ROBOT* (Gnome) are not too far from the same plane. This collection of his celebrated "positronic robot" stories, though fairly well integrated in a fresh frame, is certainly not a "novel," as the jacket claims; and much of the prose and characterization is reminiscent of the corniest space operas. But each story contains a truly striking gimmick based on the author's convincing Three Laws of Robotics; and a few, particularly *Reason* and *Liar!*, must stand among the best robot stories ever written.

Other interesting items of 1950 appeal perhaps to more limited audiences: The Macdonald Illustrated Classics edition of *DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE AND OTHER STORIES* (Coward-McCann) to Stevenson specialists (and by all means to those unfortunates who have never encountered this rich story-telling); Maurice Sandoz's Dali-illustrated *ON THE VERGE* (Doubleday) to fanciers of the off-beat and outré; Leah Bodine Drake's *A HORNBOK FOR WITCHES* (Arkham) to devotees of supernatural verse (or of attractive book-making); the reissue of A. Merritt's *DWELLERS IN THE MIRAGE* (Grandon) to those who love wild adventure even when shallowly written; and the first American edition of Dumas' 1857 *THE WOLF LEADER* (Prime), regretfully, only to specialist collectors, interested even in Dumas' drabest hack-work.

NEW FICTION

It would be a pleasure, if space allowed, to detail all the respects in which Philip Wylie is intolerable; and certainly he assumes every one of his most out-

rageous postures in the course of *THE DISAPPEARANCE* (Rinehart). But previously, in numerous novels and short stories, Wylie has also proved himself one of the most ingenious and stimulating modern creators of science-fantasy; and his worst detractor (your editors are tossing a coin for the honor) must admit that he has, in these parallel stories of a world-without-women and a world-without-men, produced a masterpiece of imaginative thinking and story-telling — postures and all. Wylie-the-Novelist, in his beautifully consistent detail-work, presents a model to writers of fantasy; and Wylie-the-Great-Thinker is acutely provocative very nearly as often as he is pretentiously exasperating.

ANTHOLOGY

The first anthology of 1951 gets the year off to a fine start. Martin Greenberg's *JOURNEY INTO INFINITY* (Gnome) continues the carefully patterned series begun with last year's *MEN AGAINST THE STARS*, this time with the emphasis less on the technological and more on the sociological aspects of Man's future history. The general level of writing and thinking is well above that of many recent collections, with particularly distinguished stories from Chandler, Brown and Asimov.

NON-FICTION

Kenneth Roberts' *HENRY GROSS AND HIS DOWSING ROD* (Doubleday) will probably prove to be the year's greatest problem for reviewers. Either Mr. Roberts is a gullible and/or irresponsible reporter; or water-witching, not only on the spot, but by remote control on a map, is a fact — and frankly, we find either answer all but impossible to accept. In any case, the book is one which no one interested in the paranormal can afford to miss — and immeasurably better written and better documented than any of last year's three quasi-scientific best-sellers.

As a needed corrective to over-ready acceptance of the unusual, we strongly recommend Joseph F. Rinn's *SIXTY YEARS OF PSYCHICAL RESEARCH* (Truth Seeker), dedicated to the proposition that "there is no limit to human gullibility." We also recommend it heartily as an exhaustive compendium of wonderful stories and gimmicks, and as a fine source of biographical material on such characters as Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

And for non-controversial, take-it-or-leave-it tales of the wondrous, you can rarely do better than the annual volume of marine curiosa collected by Edgar Rowe Snow. The latest, *SECRETS OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC ISLANDS* (Dodd, Mead), is as usual awkwardly titled, and as usual crammed with the damndest true stories you ever read.

Barry Eric Odell Pain was famous to readers in the late nineteenth century as a humorist and parodist, his work being featured in such magazines as "Punch". But the fame of a humorist is evanescent. Possibly W. E. Henley was right in his somewhat ponderous advice in 1891 that Pain abandon humor — advice which caused Pain to omit all humorous stories from his 1916 COLLECTED TALES. For delightful and acute though Pain's humor is, he is largely remembered today for many adroit puzzles and crime stories (particularly the unique "detection without crime" adventures of Horace Fish) and a few exquisitely poetic fantasies. Among the latter, we now offer you a fine fresh variation on an old theme, taken from his STORIES AND INTERLUDES (Harper, 1892).

The Glass of Supreme Moments

by BARRY PAIN

LUCAS MORNE sat in his college rooms, when the winter afternoon met the evening, depressed and dull. There were various reasons for his depression. He was beginning to be a little nervous about his health. A week before he had run second in a mile race, the finish of which had been a terrible struggle; ever since then any violent exertion or excitement had brought on symptoms which were painful, and to one who had always been strong, astonishing. He had felt them early that afternoon, on coming from the river. Besides, he was discontented with himself. He had had several men in his rooms that afternoon, who were better than he was, men who had enthusiasms and had found them satisfying. Lucas had a moderate devotion to athletics, but no great enthusiasm. Neither had he the finer perceptions. Neither was he a scholar. He was just an ordinary man.

His visitors had drunk his tea, talked of their own enthusiasms, and were gone. Nothing is so unclean as a used tea-cup; nothing is so cold as toast which has once been hot, and the concrete expression of dejection is crumbs. Even Lucas Morne, who had not the finer perceptions, was dimly conscious

that his room had become horrible, and now flung open the window. One of the men — a large, clumsy man — had been smoking mitigated Latakia; and Latakia has a way of rolling itself all round the atmosphere and kicking. Lucas seated himself in his easiest chair.

His rooms were near the chapel, and he could hear the organ. The music and the soft fall of the darkness were soothing; he could hardly see the used tea-cups now; the light from the gas-lamp outside came just a little way into the room, shyly and obliquely.

Well, he had not noticed it before, but the fireplace had become a staircase. He felt too lazy to wonder much at this. He would, he thought, have the things all altered back again on the morrow. It would be worth while to sell the staircase, seeing that its steps were fashioned of silver and crystal. Unfortunately he could not see how much there was of it, or whither it led. The first five steps were clear enough; he felt convinced that the workmanship of them was Japanese. But the rest of the staircase was hidden from his sight by a gray veil of mist. He found himself a little angry, in a severe and strictly logical way, that in these days of boasted science he could not prevent a piece of fog, measuring ten feet by seven, from coming in at an open window and sitting down on a staircase which had only just begun to exist, and blotting out all but five steps of it in its very earliest moments. He allowed that it was a beautiful mist; its color changed slowly from gray to rose, and then back again from rose to gray; fire-flies of silver and gold shot through it at intervals; but it was a nuisance, because he wanted to see the rest of the staircase, and it prevented him. Every moment the desire to see more grew stronger. At last he determined to shake off his laziness, and go up the staircase and through the mist into the something beyond. He felt sure that the something beyond would be beautiful — sure with the certainty which has nothing to do with logical conviction.

It seemed to him that it was with an effort that he brought himself to rise from the chair and walk to the foot of that lovely staircase. He hesitated there for a moment or two, and as he did so he heard the sound of footsteps, high up, far away, yet coming nearer and nearer, with light music in the sound of them. Someone was coming down the staircase. He listened eagerly and excitedly. Then through the gray mist came a gray-robed figure.

It was the figure of a woman — young, with wonderful grace in her movements. Her face was veiled, and all that could be seen of her as she paused on the fifth step was the soft, dark hair that reached to her waist, and her arms — white wonders of beauty. The rest was hidden by the gray veil, and the long gray robe, that left, however, their suggestion of classical grace and slenderness. Lucas Morne stood looking at her tremulously. He felt sure, too,

that she was looking at him, and that she could see through the folds of the thin gray veil that hid her face. She was the first to speak. Her voice in its gentleness and delicacy was like the voice of a child; it was only afterward that he heard in it the under-thrill which told of more than childhood.

"Why have you not come? I have been waiting for you, you know, up there. And this is the only time," she added.

"I am very sorry," he stammered. "You see — I never knew the staircase was there until to-day. In fact — it seems very stupid of me — but I always thought it was a fireplace. I must have been dreaming, of course. And then this afternoon I thought, or dreamed, that a lot of men came in to see me. Perhaps they really did come; and we got talking, you know —"

"Yes," she said, with the gentlest possible interruption. "I *do* know. There was one man, Fynsale, large, ugly, clumsy, a year your senior. He sat in that chair over there, and sulked and smoked Latakia. I rather like the smell of Latakia. He especially loves to write or to say some good thing; and at times he can do it. Therefore, you envy him. Then there was Blake. Blake is an athlete, like yourself, but is just a little more successful. Yes, I know you are good, but Blake is very good. You were tried for the 'Varsity — Blake was selected. He and Fynsale both have delight in ability, and you envy both. There was that dissenting little Paul Reece. He is not exactly in your set, but you were at school with him, and so you tolerate him. How good he is, for all his insignificance and social defects! Blake knows that, and kept a guard on his talk this afternoon. He would not offend Paul Reece for worlds. Paul's belief gives him earnestness, his earnestness leads him to self-sacrifice, and self-sacrifice is deep delight to him. You have more ability than Paul Reece, but you cannot reach that kind of enthusiastic happiness, and therefore you envy him. I could say similar things of the other men. It was because they made you vaguely dissatisfied with yourself that they bored you. You take pleasure — a certain pleasure — in athletics, and that pleasure would become an enthusiastic delight if you were a little better at them. Some men could get the enthusiastic delight out of as much as you can do, but your temperament is different. I know you well. You are not easily satisfied. You are not clever, but you are —" She paused.

"What am I?" he asked eagerly. He felt sure that it would be something good, and he was not less vain than other men.

"I do not think I will say — not now."

"But who are you?" His diffidence and stammering had vanished beneath her calm, quiet talk. "You must let me at least ask that. Who are you?"

"I am a woman, but not an earth-woman. And the chief difference between us is that I know nearly all the things you do not know, and you do not know nearly all the things that I know. Sometimes I forget your ignorance — do not

be angry for a word; there is no other for it, and it is not your fault. I forgot it just now when I asked you why you had not come to me up the staircase of silver and crystal, through the gray veil where the fire-flies live, and into that quiet room beyond. This is the only time; tomorrow it will not be possible. And I have —" Once more she paused. There was a charm for Lucas Morne in the things which she did not say. "Your room is dark," she continued, "and I can hardly see you."

"I will light the lamp," said Lucas hurriedly, "and — and won't you let me get you some tea?" He saw, as soon as he had said it, how unspeakably ludicrous this proffer of hospitality was. He almost fancied a smile, a moment's shimmer of little white teeth, beneath the long gray veil. "Or shall I come now — at once?" he added.

"Come now; I will show you the mirror."

"What is that?"

"You will understand when you see it. It is the glass of supreme moments."

She looked graceful, and she suggested the most perfect beauty as she stood there, a slight figure against the background of gray mist, which had grown luminous as the room below grew darker. Lucas Morne went carefully up the five steps, and together they passed through the gray, misty curtain. He was wondering what the face was like which was hidden beneath that veil; would it be possible to induce her to remove the veil? He might, perhaps, lead the conversation thither — delicately and subtly.

"A cousin of mine," he began, "who has travelled a good deal, once told me that the women of the East —"

"Yes," she said, and her voice and way were so gentle that it hardly seemed like an interruption; "and so do I."

He felt very much anticipated; for a moment he was driven back into the shy and stammering state. There were only a few more steps now, and then they entered through a rosy curtain into a room, which he supposed to be "that quiet room beyond," of which she had spoken.

It was a large room, square in shape. The floor was covered with black and white tiles, with the exception of a small square space in the centre, which looked like silver, and over which a ripple seemed occasionally to pass. She pointed it out to him. "That," she said, "is the glass of supreme moments." There were no windows, and the soft light that filled the room seemed to come from that liquid silver mirror in the centre of the floor. The walls, which were lofty, were hung with curtains of different colors, all subdued, dreamy, reposeful. These colors were repeated in the painting of the ceiling. In a recess at the further end of the room there were seats, low seats on which one could sleep. There was a faint smell of syringa in the air, making it heavy and drowsy. Now and then one heard faintly, as if afar off, the great music of an organ.

Could it, he found himself wondering, be the organ of the college chapel? It was restful and pleasant to hear. She drew him to one of the seats in the recess, and once more pointed to the mirror.

"All the ecstasy in the world lies reflected there. The supreme moments of each man's life — the scene, the spoken words — all lie there. Past and present, and future — all are there."

"Shall I be able to see them?"

"If you will."

"And how?"

"Bend over the mirror, and say the name of the man or woman into whose life you wish to see. You only have to want it, and it will appear before your eyes. But there are some lives which have no supreme moments."

"Commonplace lives?"

"Yes."

Lucas Morne walked to the edge of the mirror and knelt down, looking into it. The ripple passed to and fro over the surface. For a moment he hesitated, doubting for whom he should ask; and then he said in a low voice: "Are there supreme moments in the life of Blake — Vincent Blake, the athlete?" The surface of the mirror suddenly grew still, and in it rose what seemed a living picture.

He could see once more the mile race in which he had been defeated by Blake. It was the third and last lap; and he himself was leading by some twenty yards, for Blake was waiting. There was a vast crowd of spectators, and he could hear every now and then the dull sound of their voices. He saw Vincent Blake slightly quicken his pace and marked his own plucky attempt to answer it; he saw, too, that he had very little left in him. Gradually Blake drew up, until at a hundred yards from the finish there were not more than five yards between the two runners. Then he noticed his own fresh attempt. There were some fifty yards of desperate fighting, in which neither seemed to gain or lose an inch on the other. The voices of the excited crowd rose to a roar. And then — then Blake had it his own way. He saw himself passed a yard from the tape.

"Blake has always just beaten me," he said savagely as he turned from the mirror.

He went back to his seat. "Tell me," he said; "does that picture really represent the supreme moments of Blake's life?"

"Yes," answered the veiled woman, "he will have nothing quite like the ecstasy which he felt at winning that race. He will marry, and have children, and his married life will be happy, but the happiness will not be so intense. There is an emotion-meter outside this room, you know, which measures such things."

"Now if one wanted to bet on a race," he began. Then he stopped short. He had none of the finer perceptions, but it did not take these to show him that he was becoming a little inappropriate. "I will look again at the mirror," he added after a pause. "I am afraid, though, that all this will make me more discontented with myself."

Once more he looked into the glass of supreme moments. He murmured the name of Paul Reece, the good little dissenter, his old school-fellow. It was not in the power of accomplishment that Paul Reece excelled Lucas Morne, but only in the goodness and spirituality of his nature. As he looked, once more a picture formed on the surface of the mirror. It was a picture of the future.

It was a sombre picture of the interior of a church. Through the open door one saw the snow falling slowly into the dusk of a winter afternoon. Within, before the richly decorated altar, flickered the little ruby flames of hanging lamps. On the walls, dim in the dying light, were painted the stations of the Cross. The fragrance of the incense smoke still lingered in the air. He could see but one figure, bowed, black-robed, before the altar. "And is this Paul Reece — who was a dissenter?" he asked himself, knowing that it was he. Someone was seated at the organ, and the cry of the music was full of appeal, and yet full of peace: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi!*

Then the picture died away, and once more the little ripple moved to and fro over the surface of the liquid silver mirror. Lucas went back again to his place. The veiled woman was leaning backward, her small white hands linked together. She did not speak, but he was sure that she was looking at him — looking at him intently. Slowly it came to him that there was in this woman a subtle, mastering attraction which he had never known before. And side by side with this thought there still remained the feeling which had filled him as he witnessed the supreme moments of Paul Reece, a paradoxical feeling which was half restlessness and half peace.

"I do not know if I envy Paul," he said, "but if so, it is not the envy which hurts. I shall never be like him. I can't feel as he does. It's not in me. But this picture did not make me angry as the other did." He looked steadfastly at the graceful, veiled figure, and added in a lower tone: "When I spoke of the travels of my cousin a little while ago — over Palestine and Turkey, and thereabouts, you know — I had meant to lead up to a question, as you saw. I had meant to ask you if you would put away your veil and let me see your face. And there are many things which I want to know about you. May I not stay here by your side and talk?"

"Soon, very soon, I will talk with you, and after that you will see me. What do you think, then, of the glass of supreme moments?"

"It is wonderful. I only feared the sight of exquisite happiness in others

would make me more discontented. At first you seemed to think that I was too dissatisfied."

"Do not be deceived. Do not think that these supreme moments are everything; for that life is easiest which is gentle, level, placid, and has no supreme moments. There is a picture in the life of your friend Fynsale which I wish you to see. Look at it in the mirror; then I will tell you something."

Lucas did as he was bidden. The mirror showed him a wretched, dingy room — sitting-room and bedroom combined — in a lodging house. At a little rickety table, pushed in front of a very small fire, Fynsale sat writing by lamp-light. The lamp was out of order apparently. The combined smell of lamp and Latakia was poignant. There was a pile of manuscripts before him, and on the top of it he was placing the sheet he had just written. Then he rose from his chair, folded his arms on the mantel-piece, and bent down, with his head on his hands, looking into the fire. It was an uncouth attitude of which, Lucas remembered, Fynsale had been particularly fond when he was at college.

When the picture had passed, Lucas looked round, and saw that the veiled woman had left the recess and was now standing by his side. "I do not understand this," he said. "How can those be the supreme moments in Fynsale's life? He looked poor and shabby, and the room was positively wretched. Where does the ecstasy come in?"

"He has just finished his novel; and he is quite madly in love with it. Some of it is very good, and some of it — from merely physical reasons — is very bad; he was half-starved when he was writing it, and it is not possible to write very well when one is half-starved. But he loves it. I am speaking of all this as if, like the picture of it, it were present; although, of course, it has not happened yet. But I will tell you more. I will show you, in this case at least, what these moments of ecstasy are worth. Some of Fynsale's book, I have said, is very good, and some of it is very bad; but none of it is what people want. He will take it to publisher after publisher, and they will refuse it. After three years it will at last be published, and it will not succeed in the least. And all through these years of failure he will recall from time to time the splendid joy he felt at finishing that book, and how glad he was that he had made it. The thought of that past ecstasy will make the torture all the worse."

"Perhaps, then, after all I should be glad that I am commonplace?"

"It does not always follow, though, that the commonplace people have commonplace lives. There have been men who have been so ordinary that it hurt one to have anything to do with them, and yet the gods have made them come into poetry."

Once more Lucas fancied that a smile with magic in it might be fluttering

under that gray veil. Every moment the fascination of this woman, whose face he had not seen, and with whom he had spoken for so short a time, grew stronger on him. He did not know from whence it came, whether it lay in the grace of her figure and her movements, or in the beauty of her long, dark hair, or in the music of her voice, or in that subtle, indefinable way in which she seemed to show him that she cared for him deeply. The room itself, quiet, mystical, restful, dedicated to the ecstasy of the world, had its effect upon his senses. More than ever before he felt himself impressed, tremulous with emotion. He knew that she saw how, in spite of himself, the look of adoration would come into his eyes.

And suddenly she, whom but a moment before he had imagined to be smiling at her own light thoughts, seemed swayed by a more serious impulse.

"You must be comforted, though, and be angry with yourself no longer. For you are *not* commonplace, because you know that you *are* commonplace. It is something to have wanted the right things, although the gods have given you no power to attain them, nor even the wit and words to make your want eloquent." Her voice was deeper, touched with the underthrill.

"This," he said, "is the second time you have spoken of the gods — and yet we are in the nineteenth century."

"Are we? I am very old and very young. Time is nothing to me; it does not change me. Yesterday in Italy each grave and stream spoke of divinity. '*Non omnis moriar*,' sang one in confidence, '*Non omnis moriar!*' I heard his voice, and now he is passed and gone from the world."

"We read him still," said Lucas Morne, with a little pride. He was not intending to take the classical tripos, but he had with the help of a translation read that ode from which she was quoting. She did not heed his interruption in the least. She went on speaking:

"And to-day in England there is but little which is sacred; yet here, too, my work is seen; and here, too, as they die, they cry, 'I shall not die, but live!'"

"You will think me stupid," said Lucas Morne, a little bewildered, "but I really do not understand you. I do not follow you."

"That is because you do not know who I am. Before the end of to-day I think we shall understand each other well."

There was a moment's pause, and then Lucas Morne spoke again:

"You have told me that even in the lives of commonplace people there are sometimes supreme moments. I had scarcely hoped for them and you have bidden me not to desire them. Shall I — even I — know what ecstasy means?"

"Yes, yes; I think so."

"Then let me see it, as I saw the rest pictured in the mirror." He spoke with some hesitation, his eyes fixed on the tiled floor of the room.

"That need not be," she answered, and she hardly seemed to have perfect control over the tones of her voice now. "That need not be, Lucas Morne, for the supreme moments of your life are here, here and now."

He looked up, suddenly and excitedly. She had flung back the gray veil over her long, dark hair, and stood revealed before him, looking ardently into his eyes. Her face was paler than that of average beauty; the lips, shapely and scarlet, were just parted; but the eyes gave the most wonderful charm. They were like flames at midnight — not the soft, gray eyes that make men better, but the passionate eyes that make men forget honor, and reason, and everything. She stretched out both hands toward him, impulsively, appealingly. He grasped them in his own. His own hands were hot, burning; every nerve in them tingled with excitement. For a moment he held her at arm's-length, looking at her and said nothing. At last he found words:

"I knew that you would be like this. I think that I have loved you all my life. I wish that I might be with you forever."

There was a strange expression on her face. She did not speak, but she drew him nearer to her.

"Tell me your name," he said.

"Yesterday, where that poet lived — that confident poet — they called me Libitina; and here to-day, they call me Death. My name matters not, if you love me. For to you alone have I come thus. For the rest, I have done my work unseen. Only in this hour — only in this hour — was it possible."

He had hardly heeded what she said. He bent down over her face.

"Stay!" she said in a hurried whisper; "if you kiss me you will die."

He smiled triumphantly. "But I shall die kissing you," he said. And so their lips met. Her lips were scarlet, but they were icy cold.



'Twas Brillig . . .

by EVAN H. APPELMAN

"Tick," went the clock. "Four o'clock."
"Everything is in readiness?" asked the fat thing.
"It is," said the skinny thing.
"It will occur as scheduled?"
"It will."
"Good day, then," said the fat thing.
"Good day," said the skinny thing.
"Tick," said the clock.

The girl stretched, shook the sand out of her hair, and cuddled up to her husband of three days. "Isn't this lovely, George?"

Her husband murmured agreement. The sun shone down cheerfully upon the beach thronging with honeymooners, sun-worshippers, and other primates of the incomprehensible species *homo sapiens*. Until . . .

"Tick," observed the clock. "Five o'clock."
"Now," said the fat thing.
"Tick," replied the clock.

"George, look!" exclaimed the girl. "It's getting dark."
George looked sleepily at the sky. "Some sort of mist covering the sun. Hmmm, it's spreading all over the sky."
"George! Look at it! It's coming down on us. George, what is it? George! G-E-O-R-G-E . . . !"

"Tick," cheered the clock. "Six o'clock."
"Time for dinner," said the fat thing, and rose to leave.
"Tick," said the clock. "Tick-tock."

To underline the exact rightness of Mr. Appelman's title, you are reminded of Humpty Dumpty's definition of brillig: "four o'clock in the afternoon — the time when you begin broiling things for dinner."

Your editors have often questioned the standard assumption of science fiction that robots will be android — that is, shaped to imitate as nearly as possible the body design of that featherless biped, man. For the great virtue of the functional design of man's body is that he is a versatile, all-purpose creation; for any given specific purpose for which a robot servant might be constructed, a more suitably functional design could be found. There are exceptions, to be sure; Larry Sternig provides one reason for man-shaped robots in this issue, and Betsy Curtis will reveal a surprising new justification in our next. But by and large (and the latest developments in that current borderland between the most advanced machine and the first true robot bear us out), androids are not fundamentally practical. Are inventors, however, always practical in their inventions? Might not a scientist succumb to the megalomaniacal pleasure of playing God by aping the creation of a human being? And if that android possessed the in-built urge to increase his kind . . . Mr. Liddell presents the terrifying consequences (in a disquietingly immediate future) in this novelet — a Hitchcockian melodrama of the uncertain and the unexpected.

Android

by C. H. LIDDELL

BRADLEY LOOKED at the Director's head. His stomach tried to crawl up into his throat. He felt suddenly dizzy. He knew that he was betraying himself, and that would be absolutely fatal.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a few coins, and let the coins drop, as though by accident, to the airfoam carpet.

"Oh-oh," he said, and immediately crouched down to recover the money. It's a basic principle of first aid, in cases of shock or faintness, to lower the head, and Bradley was doing just that. The giddiness began to pass as his circulation picked up. In a moment, he knew, he'd have to stand up and face the Director, and by that time he was determined to have his feelings under control. But how the devil could the Director's head be where it was — after last night?

And then sanity came back. He remembered that, last night, the Director couldn't possibly have recognized him through the rubber-plastic false-face he had worn. On the other hand, after last night, the Director of New Products, Inc., should have been incapable of living or breathing, not to speak of

using his memory-centers. Bradley had left the man's body in one corner of the room and his head in another.

Man?

With a violent effort he controlled himself. He recaptured the last coin and stood up, his face flushed. "Sorry," he said. "I came in to deliver that report on the induced mutation project, not to act like a horn of plenty." His fascinated stare moved down to the Director's neck and flicked away. The high collar concealed any — any mark. Any mark, such as might have been left by razor-sharp steel shearing through flesh and bone. . . .

Was there a reason for the high collar? Bradley couldn't be sure. In the fall of 1960, men's fashions had changed considerably from the uncomfortable styles of a few years before, and the Director's flaring half-cape, with its gilt-braided, close-fitting collar, was far from extreme. Bradley owned one like that himself.

Lord, he thought in white panic — can't the — the things even be killed?

Arthur Court, the Director, turned a bland smile on his Chief of Organization. "Hangover?" he asked. "Take an irradiation treatment. Medical's always happy to use their gadgets. Our staff's too healthy to suit them, I think."

He talked!

A mad thought whirled into Bradley's brain: a ringer? Was this really Court sitting behind the desk? But instantly he knew that couldn't be the explanation. It was Court, the same Arthur Court whom Bradley had killed not many hours ago. If you could call it killing, when Court hadn't actually been alive . . . at least, not with the same sort of life that activated human beings.

He forced his mind from the danger-level and became the efficient Chief of Organization of the company. "You can't argue with a hangover," he said. "Here're the latest figures —"

"What about that variant factor? I gathered there was something that upset the calculations."

"There was," Bradley said. "But it's a theoretical variable. It doesn't matter a bit in practice, because we're not trying to mutate people. And the sterility rate doesn't vary abnormally with fruit-flies or — or strawberries."

"But it does with people — eh?" Court glanced rapidly through the papers Bradley had given him.

"Uh-huh. We could follow it up, but it would cost money and wouldn't have any immediately practical results. That's up to you to decide, sir."

"We can predict non-human reactions with reasonable accuracy, though?"

Bradley nodded. "Two per cent factor of error. Close enough for us to mutate potatoes twenty feet long and tasting like roast beef, without any danger of getting them half an inch long instead, and tasting like cyanide."

"Does the curve of variance rise with animals?"

"No. Only people. We can hatch chickens which are all white meat and built cube-shaped for easy carving. And, really, we could mutate people too, if it weren't illegal — but the uncertainty factor steps in there, as I said. Too many people become sterilized instead of having mutated children."

"Um," Court said, and pondered. "Well, forget about the people, then. There's no profit in it. Drop that part of the investigation. Go ahead with the rest. All right?"

"Fine," Bradley agreed. He had expected to be stopped at this point of the inquiry, though, since last night, not by Court. He found he was still holding an unlighted cigarette. He put it in his mouth and went to the side door and opened it. Then he turned.

"That's all?"

He watched Court twist his neck around, and had an insane fear that the man's head might fall off. But it didn't.

"Yes, that's all for now," Court said pleasantly.

Bradley went out, trying to forget the narrow red line he had just seen circling the Director's throat, revealed when the man had turned his head.

The things couldn't be killed by decapitation, then. But they could be destroyed. They could be dissolved with acid, smashed with a hammer, dismantled, burned. . . .

The trouble was, there was as yet no sure way to recognize the creatures. The sterility curve after exposure to mild radioactivity meant something, but ordinary humans could have become sterilized too — though not usually by such slight dosages of gamma rays. And even then, some people were sterile anyway.

All Bradley had was a general method of screening. After that, he had to depend on psychology to weed out the monsters. He knew that they could usually be found in positions of power and influence, though not necessarily in the public eye. Like Arthur Court, who, as Director of New Products, Inc., wielded tremendous influence on the culture — since civilization is moulded by the technological tools placed in its hands.

Bradley shivered.

Last night he had cut off Arthur Court's head.

Arthur Court was an android.

"And what are you going to do about it?" Bradley asked himself in the hall outside Court's door. He looked down with a certain academic interest at his own hand shaking until the papers he held fluttered. What *could* he do about it? He or any other man?

You couldn't fight them on equal terms. Probably their I.Q. was far higher than mankind's. On terms of pure intellect Bradley would have no chance at all. Super-comptometers could solve abstruse problems no limited human mind could tackle. Last night Bradley had worn a distorting rubber mask — but if

Court's cold metallic brain set itself the problem of reasoning out his identity, wouldn't Court arrive at the right answer sooner or later?

Had he already arrived at an answer?

Bradley suppressed a panicky impulse to run. There was such dead silence behind the door at his elbow. For all he knew *they* had vision that could slip between the buzzing atoms of the door and see Bradley here as if he stood beyond glass — see through him and into the patterns of his brain, and read all his thoughts as they took form.

"They're only androids," he reminded himself with great firmness, forcing his gait to a walk as he turned away down the hall. "If they had that much power I wouldn't be here now."

Still, he wondered with a corroding urgency just what had happened last night after he left Court's apartment. He would not think of how Court had looked, lying there motionless beside the heavy steel blade dimmed by that stickiness that looked like blood and was not human blood.

Had he repaired himself, after Bradley left? Repaired was the word, of course — not *cured*. Only a human could be cured. It probably depended on just where the brain of the android was located. Not necessarily in the head. The head is really too vulnerable a place for such an important mechanism. You could improve on the structure of the human in so many ways. Perhaps the androids had. Perhaps Court's brain was sheltered somewhere in the mysterious chambers of his synthetic body, and its cold, clicking thoughts had gone on their steely processes all the while Bradley stood there looking down in incredulous shock at the body of his — his victim?

Which was the victim and which the victor?

All functional processes had certainly stopped in the robot after decapitation. Bradley had made sure of that. No respiration, no heartbeat. But somewhere inside, perhaps the metallic brain had been clicking quietly on its cold way. So cold, Bradley thought irrationally, that not all the synthetic warmth of the synthetic blood could raise it a fraction of a degree toward human temperature.

Either Court's body had risen after Bradley left, then, and welded on the head again, or else others had come to — repair — the sabotage. Did each robot, in operation, send out the equivalent of a steady beam of energy which, when it ceased, brought a repair crew to the spot? If that had happened, it was lucky Bradley had not lingered too long in that room where no murder had been done, though Court's head lay so far from his motionless body. . . .

Of course I could be just as crazy as a bedbug, Bradley reminded himself sardonically. Certainly he would have a hard time convincing anyone he wasn't. And he would have to convince someone. He couldn't go on alone any farther.

He had gone too far now to keep this knowledge to himself. By his very act of proof, by the cutting off of an android head, he had given himself away. Sooner or later they would track down the identity of the man behind that rubber mask. Before it happened, he would have to pass this information on.

And there he ran his second terrible risk. The androids would show him no mercy when they caught him. But how much could he expect from his own kind, when he told his fantastic tale? *I'll end in a padded cell*, he thought, *while they go on multiplying outside until —*

Until what? Until they outnumber the humans and take over control? Perhaps they already had. Perhaps they had let him go free after that harmless murder because only he was human now in the whole civilized world. . . . Perhaps he was quite harmless, really. Perhaps —

"Oh, shut up," Bradley urged himself impatiently.

"Then at least you don't suspect *me* of being a — an android?" Dr. Wallinger asked dourly. He was slightly nervous, as the result of having sat for ten minutes now with a gun-muzzle pointed unwaveringly at his stomach. It was, of course, ridiculous that a mysterious rubber-masked figure in a gold-braided cape whose flare concealed most of its wearer's body should be sitting here in his library forcing him to listen to psychotic nonsense.

"You have children," Bradley said, his voice a little muffled behind the mask. "That was how I could feel sure about you."

"Look," Wallinger said earnestly, "I'm a nuclear physicist. I think a psychologist could probably give you more help than —"

"A psychiatrist, you mean?"

"Not at all. Of course not. But —"

"But all the same, you think I'm crazy. All right. I expected you would. I suppose I wouldn't have trusted you very far if you hadn't. That reaction's normal. But — blast you, man, open your mind! Look at the thing fairly. Isn't it conceivable that this could have happened?"

Wallinger, with a glance at the gun, put his fingertips together and pursed his lips. "Um, conceivable. . . . Well, there's no threshold, naturally. Though 1/100 roentgen per day is considered safe unless both parents are subject to gamma bombardment. You've borne in mind the normal recovery time? Even under bombardment, you know, the changed genes have less tendency to divide and are gradually supplanted by normal genes."

"You aren't telling me anything new," Bradley said with forced patience. "My point is that gamma radiations that would produce mutation in humans have no effect on robots, which are sterile to begin with. If *only* androids were sterile it would be simple, but gamma rays induce sterility in humans too. You have children. You're all right. But —"

"Hold on," Wallinger said. "Couldn't there be android children? If they can make adults, couldn't they put together synthetic children too?"

"No. I've thought that out carefully. Children grow too fast. They'd have to reorganize the whole android child every couple of weeks, change all its inward and outward dimensions, work over everything about it. I think that would call for too much time and effort. They can't afford it yet, if my calculations are right. There aren't enough of them. And later, when they could afford the job, it wouldn't be necessary. You see? By the time they were able to go to all that trouble, they wouldn't need to. They'd be in the majority. They wouldn't have to deceive us. They —"

Bradley paused. His voice had been getting out of control. Above all, he would have to remain cool and calm about this.

"There's one other angle," he said. "I don't think an android child could deceive other children. Real children. They see things too directly. The android brain is coordinated to synthetic human adult thinking. They've done a good job of it, but even now, if you know the truth, you can catch them by their psychological failures of adjustment. For one thing, they aren't exhibitionists. They never try to bully or assert themselves over others. Why should they? They're perfectly functioning and efficient gadgets. They don't need to compensate. They're too well adjusted to be really human."

"Then why couldn't they adjust to a child mentality?"

"For the same reason they couldn't create a growing child physically. A child's mind is too different from an adult's, and it changes too fast. It grows. Anyhow, why should they? They don't need to. They've fooled us all up to now, and even when one man knows the truth, what can he do about it? You won't listen to me. You won't —"

"I'm listening," Wallinger said mildly. "It makes an interesting tale, anyhow. I wish you'd tell me what gave you the idea to start with."

Bradley caught himself on the verge of saying, "It was my work. I had a chance to correlate a lot of material and everything added up to an unknown factor." But he didn't say it. He meant to remain anonymous until he felt sure it was safe to reveal himself. A clue like that could be tracked down too easily.

"I — figured it out," he said. "I — have friends in various jobs who kept mentioning little discrepancies they'd noticed. I got interested. It began to add up. There were accidents in which the patients *should* have died, sometimes did die, and then came back to life. Oh, they always covered it by talk about adrenalin shots and so forth, but it's happened too often. And always in cases involving people in influential positions. I don't know just how they work it — maybe a real person dies and his android double takes his place. They've got the recuperative powers of a machine, but a machine's handicaps, too. Cut one and it bleeds, but —"

Bradley paused, measuring Wallinger's receptiveness with a wary glance.

"All right," he said suddenly, "I'll tell you what really happened. Please try to listen without prejudice if you can. It was six months ago. I was alone in a — a laboratory — with one of my friends." It had been Arthur Court, the Director. This had been the first proof Bradley actually saw.

"He fumbled a retort and it shattered and cut his wrist to the bone. He didn't know I saw it happen. And even though I did see, for a long time I tried to argue myself out of believing it. On the surface of his wrist there was flesh, and it bled. But underneath were wires and metal. I tell you, I *saw them*! It wasn't an artificial arm, it was the real thing. An artificial arm wouldn't be part flesh and blood."

"What did he do?"

"That's the real give-away. He put his hand in his pocket and made some excuse to get out of the room. He didn't want me to know, because he'd have had to call a doctor, and I suppose there weren't any of *their* men within reach. He couldn't let a human even go through the motions of bandaging him. Oh, they're vulnerable in lots of ways. But now is the time to strike, before they cut down too far on their vulnerabilities. *Now* —" Bradley paused again, forcing his voice under control.

"What do you suggest, then?" Wallinger asked in his mild voice. It was impossible to guess whether Bradley had succeeded in touching the man's mind with conviction, or even the beginnings of it.

"I don't know." Under the flared cape Bradley's shoulders sagged. "That's why I came to you. I thought — well, look. Here's one possibility. I need an infallible way of locating them. Psychology's all right up to a point, but it's too slow. I've got to know so much about the subject's life and habit patterns. If the factor of mechanical logic and efficiency's too accurate, that's a double check. But —"

"But there's the mechanical factor itself," Wallinger offered unexpectedly. "Have you thought of that? It might —" He paused and grinned a little sheepishly. "Go on," he said.

Behind the rubber mask Bradley's face creased in a broad, exultant smile. That was the opening wedge. He had succeeded in presenting the physicist with a hypothetical problem that had struck a spark of momentary interest. It was still in the realm of theory, but Wallinger had responded. That was all that mattered now. He went on with increased enthusiasm.

"That's it exactly. A machine has to be operated. There must be a power source somewhere. Maybe it's in them, or maybe they pick it up from some broadcasting source. But it should be possible to detect it. Something like a thyratron recorder hidden in places they frequent, or a Geiger counter, or —"

"You think they could be trapped because of ionizing radiations?"

"Oh, I don't know what I think. It could be nuclear fission that works the things. It could be anything. That's why I need help from someone like you. Someone who could make closer guesses than I can."

Wallinger regarded his fingertips. "I couldn't, you know," he said. "Not without much more information than you can give me. You've asked me to hear you with an open mind. Now you listen to me. If our positions were reversed, wouldn't *you* demand more proof than a stranger's say-so? It would take almost unlimited time and experiment to make a theoretical gadget to detect these theoretical androids of yours, especially since you can't even guess yet what their functional principle is. Have you thought of trying it from some more practical angle — x-rays, for instance? The human organism is a tremendously complicated structure. I doubt if it could be perfectly duplicated."

Bradley shrugged beneath the flaring cape. "All an x-ray shows is light and shadow. The — things — are constructed internally to register normally on a fluoroscope. The only way to be certain would be by using surgery — and how could you do that? They never get sick. If you'd seen what I have —"

He paused. He couldn't say, "If you'd cut off Arthur Court's head and knew what I know about the wires and the plastic tubes, the vertebrae that aren't bone —" But if he admitted how far he had gone to get his certain proof, it would sound to Wallinger like proof of his own madness.

"They're part flesh and blood, and part machine," he said carefully. "Maybe the mechanical parts are necessary to keep the living tissues functioning normally. But we'll never prove it except by force. They're all adults, in high positions. You'd need their consent to perform an operation, and they naturally won't give it. Unless —" He paused. The idea that had flashed through his mind blotted out Wallinger's face for a moment. Perhaps there was a way, after all. Perhaps —

"Now listen to me," Wallinger was saying patiently, his eyes on the gun. "I'm not unreasonable. You've got an interesting idea here, but you aren't ready yet to prove anything. Why don't you go back to your job, whatever it is, and gather some more data? Then when you —"

"*I'm afraid to go back,*" Bradley said in a thin voice.

A knock, low down on the closed door, interrupted Wallinger's reply. Before he could turn, the door opened a small crack and through it bounded a half-grown cat closely followed by a small girl and a much smaller boy. The cat hurtled across the carpet in the stiff-legged, high-tailed gallop which is a cat's idea of humor. The girl paused when she saw Bradley, but the boy was too intent on the animal to notice anything.

Wallinger said in a voice that did not sound at all like his own, "Children, go back upstairs! Now!" His face was suddenly grey. He did not glance at Bradley.

The cat had fallen over heavily and lay lashing its tail and making clawless boxing motions at the small boy. Its rough, imperfect purring filled the sudden silence in the room.

"Jerry," Wallinger said, "take the kitten and go back upstairs. Do you hear me? Sue, you know you mustn't come into my study without knocking. Go on upstairs."

"We knocked," the girl said, her eyes on Bradley, who had slipped the gun under a fold of his cloak. He was trying to analyze a thought that had flashed through his mind as soon as he saw the children. There was something here he could use, but it would take time to work the idea out.

He stood up, seeing Wallinger's tense start as he moved. The man was terrified. Bradley knew why, suddenly.

The girl watched the stranger with round, interested eyes. The boy and the cat had simultaneously noticed him now and both were stricken with shyness. The cat scrambled to its feet and prepared to sell its life dearly, and the boy looked around for something to hide behind. The little girl, however, exhibited unmistakable signs of intending to show off. She was around seven, Bradley guessed. He glanced from face to face of the Wallinger family, and then grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I won't keep you any longer, Doctor. You'll hear from me."

"By all means," Wallinger said, too heartily. He was only interested now in getting his children away from the dangerous proximity of his guest. He followed Bradley into the hall, pushing the children behind him and closing the door.

"I —" He started to stammer a little.

"Forget it," Bradley said. "What do you think I am? They're nice kids."

Wallinger sighed. "Where can I get in touch with you?"

"You can't. I'm going to bring you proof of what I've told you. Those things are half machines under their skins, and I'll find some way to make you believe it. I suppose you'll call the police as soon as I'm gone. I can't help that."

"No, no, of course I won't," Wallinger lied soothingly.

"All right. One more thing, though. I said I was afraid to go back. I meant it. I've done — well, some things that may have given me away. Things I had to do, to make sure. . . . It's a toss-up now whether they or I find the proof we're after first. Dr. Wallinger, I'm going to write down names and facts on this case — things I don't dare tell you now. If you receive that information, you'll know the androids got their proof first. And that in itself ought to be *your* proof all this is true. I won't be around any more, if that happens. It will all depend on you then."

"Don't worry about that," Wallinger said. "I'm sure —"

"All right, all right," Bradley cut him off. "Wait and see. Good-by, Doctor. You'll hear from me."

He watched the house over his shoulder as he went down the street. No one came out. When he reached the corner he turned it, entered a drugstore and made his way back through the crowded aisles to the telephone booths beside a window. Through the window he could see far away the corner of the Wallinger house, and the library window where Wallinger's desk was. At the desk a distant man sat telephoning, making quick, excited gestures as he talked.

Bradley sighed. At least, Wallinger didn't know his face or name. He could give the police only a circumstantial tale almost too wild for belief. Bradley would have to walk a knife-edged path now, balancing like a tight-rope walker. Both sides were against him.

He drew a deep breath, squared his shoulders and turned back toward the office where Arthur Court would be waiting for him.

Two of them stood at Court's desk, their backs to him. Bradley paused in the door. Something was wrong. Instinct warned him — a feeling in the air, the poise of the two before him, intangibles that still seemed to shriek an alarm to nerves tense enough to catch their message.

Of the two at the desk, one was not human. The other went by the name of Johnson, and he might not be human either. It was hard to tell.

Bradley had to try twice before his voice would come normally from a suddenly dry throat.

"You want me, sir?"

Court turned, smiling. His high collar hid the line where head and neck had been welded back in place. His smile was perfectly normal, but Bradley imagined now he could hear the tiny, soundless clicking of infinitesimal gears as the android's jaw moved and its inhuman muscles drew up.

"Look here, Bradley," Court said. "Ever see this before?"

Bradley looked. Then for an instant the blood drained from his head and the room went grey with his sudden giddiness. But this time he did not dare to drop anything or even to pause while he got control of himself again. They were both watching. He made a tremendous effort and forced the grey-ness back, forced the quiver out of his voice, forced his hands to stop shaking.

"See what?" he asked in a perfectly normal voice. But he knew well enough.

Court held up the razor-edged blade that had struck his head from his neck forty-eight hours ago. It was unmistakably the same heavy weapon Bradley had bought at a second-hand shop two days before he used it on the Director. He knew it by the carving on the handle, by the nick in the blade where some inhumanly durable metal in Arthur Court's neck had bitten into

the honed edge of the steel. When Bradley saw it last, it lay beside the headless android body, red with unreal android blood.

"Ever see it before?" Court asked again.

"I — don't think so," Bradley heard himself saying, with just the right amount of impersonal interest. "Not to remember, anyhow. Why?"

They looked thoughtfully at him. And by that single look, identical in both faces, he was suddenly quite sure that neither was human. It was something about the quality of the stare. He realized after a moment that it was the same look he had seen in the Wallinger kitten's eyes — remote, wild, speculative, not inimical but wary. One species looking at another species, measuring possible danger. The kitten had seen him from quite another angle, from low down, in sharp perspective, and probably not in colors, but in tones of grey. It was extraordinary, suddenly, to think how strange he might have looked to the small, wild, wary creature. If he could see himself as it saw him, he might not recognize that looming figure as himself at all. And it occurred to him now that to the androids he must look equally strange and alien. In what colors beyond spectrum-range did they see him? And what a soft, vulnerable structure of flesh and bone he must look to these creatures of steel and synthetics.

They let him wait a long moment before either spoke or moved. Then that cold-lensed stare dropped from his face, both androids acting as simultaneously as if they moved on a single shaft. It was a mistake, Bradley thought — they shouldn't let me realize how mechanically they operate. And the second thought, close behind the first, warned him that perhaps now they didn't care. They knew what he knew. They had nothing more to hide. . . .

Deliberately Court turned and made a note on his desk-pad.

"All right, Bradley, thanks. Oh — wait a minute. Be in your office for the next half-hour, will you? I want to talk to you again."

Bradley nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. He was suddenly filled with a deep and bitter humiliation that he must accept the orders of this — this machine.

It was the reversal of all normal things, for a man to say "sir" to a thing of gears and wiring.

He looked down at his own hands lying clenched before him on his desk. Ten minutes had ticked by. Before the next twenty were gone he would have to act. They knew. It had been no accident that they called him in to see the nicked steel blade. How they had traced it to him he could not imagine, but their cold, concise brains worked on theories of logic he could not even guess at. They had outwitted him, apparently, without effort. For all his precautions, his careful hiding of everything that might lead back to his identity,

they knew. Or if they did not, they were too definitely suspicious to ignore. In the next five minutes, ten at most, he would have to make up his mind. He would have to act.

He couldn't. All that filled his mind was the bitterness of premature defeat. How could he combat them, when even his own kind dismissed him as psychotic? It was doubtful, he told himself, if the whole human race, rousing at this moment to realization and activity, could defeat them now. How far had their preparations gone? How many of them were there? Too many for one man to fight.

He thought of the whole long history of the race of man, struggling up through countless milleniums of unrecorded time, through five thousand years of slowly increasing knowledge and maturity — to this hour. To the laying in iron android hands, gloved with synthetic flesh, of that priceless heritage. What would they do with the gift? Why were they taking over this culture mankind had been so painfully long in building? Would it mean anything at all to them, or would they cast aside the heritage of all those milleniums and build up their own soulless civilization on a foundation that did not even spare a glance for all man's wasted centuries?

"*How did it start?*" he asked himself. "*Why? Why?*" And out of the human logic of his own mind came the glimmer of an answer. "*When the first man made the first successful android, the human race was doomed.*"

For a successful android meant one indistinguishable from man, one capable of creating others in its own image, one capable of independent motion and reasoning. And what purpose moved in the brain of that first of its metal kind? Had its human creator implanted there some command which led — knowingly or unknowingly — to all that followed? Had the order been one which the android could achieve only by duplicating itself until the human race was infected through and through with the robot cells of the androids?

It was quite possible. Perhaps the original creator still lived, perhaps he was dead — of age, of accident, of murder at the hands of his own Frankensteinian creations. And paradoxically, perhaps the android race moved on and on along the outward fanning lines of that first command, following toward infinity, toward the last decimal place, some impossible goal which no human being would now ever know. . . .

"They'll finish me," Bradley told himself, almost without emotion. "If they don't suspect me yet, they will. And there's nothing I can do to stop them. Wallinger didn't believe me. No one else will. And the androids will follow me until they catch me no matter how far I run. When they finish me off, they'll probably set to work to make their disguise so perfect not even I could have penetrated it, knowing what I know. They could do that. They could reason out every point where I suspected them, and stop every gap with humanoid

rior. They're machines. That's part of their problem. They can work it if they set themselves the job. Maybe they're working on it now. By the time they finish me, maybe. . . ."

He slammed both fists hard upon the desk. "No!" he told himself fiercely, and rose.

There were fifteen minutes left.

The telephone on Arthur Court's desk buzzed. The android put out a metallic hand and machine spoke into machine. Out of the mouthpiece Bradley's voice sounded small and clear.

"Hello. Hello, sir. This is Bradley. Look, are you busy? Something very odd has just turned up and I thought you ought to be the first to know. I — I'm not sure what to do."

"What is it? What are you talking about?"

"I'd rather not say on the phone."

"Where are you?"

"Across the street. You know the Green Door Grille?"

"I thought I told you to wait in your office, Bradley."

"When you hear what I've got to tell you —" Bradley paused for an instant to swallow his own cold anger at the arrogance in the voice of the machine — "you'll understand. Can you come?"

"Sit tight. I'll be there in five minutes."

Bradley sat at the wheel of his car, feeling the faint throb of the motor running softly. His eyes were on the door of the office building across the street. His fingers were clenched on the plastic of the wheel and the rhythmic beat of the car seemed an echo of the heavy beating in his chest as he waited.

Arthur Court came out of the revolving door. He looked up and down the street. He turned left and with long strides hurried down the block toward the little side-street upon which the Green Door opened. Bradley waited, watching Court, watching the traffic, biding his time.

It worked with miraculous precision. There were only three pedestrians on the side-street and all were walking the other way. Heavy trucks parked along the narrow curbing shut out all vision except the most direct. It was as if Arthur Court were dodging through a series of little private rooms between the trucks — and in the last little room he had a rendezvous with Bradley that he did not yet know about. . . .

The car purred like a tiger under Bradley's hands as he rolled into the quiet street where Court moved ahead of him. This would have to be gauged exactly right, Bradley reminded himself tensely. Not too little, not too much. Not before Court was in a corner where he could not escape even by the exer-

cise of instant reflexes, impulses electron-fast moving a body that was literally steel wire and springs. Not until he was in a trap of no escape.

The car seemed to gather its haunches beneath it and spring. It roared in the quiet street and Court turned wildly around. His face was pure machine, Bradley thought, in that unguarded moment when the cold-lensed eyes met his. Bradley was part of the automobile, the two welded into one so that the car was his weapon, obedient to his hand as the steel blade had been obedient that severed Court's head from his neck. But this time there would be no mistake.

He crouched over the wheel, sighting the car like a gun, pinning Court between fender and fender, centered beyond the radiator cap, with the blank wall of a truck behind him. Man and man-made machine were one juggernaut weapon that crashed down upon machine-made machine and flattened it against a wall of steel. . . .

Bradley saw Court's face go blank beyond the radiator cap. He saw the machine-body crumple slowly down out of sight. He waited for an instant, ready to urge the car on if he had to. . . .

"It's all right," Bradley said soothingly. Court stirred and mumbled on the seat beside him. "No, it's all right, Court. Just relax. You had a little accident, but don't worry, I'm not taking you to a doctor. . . ."

Court said, "No—" almost clearly. Bradley sighed and pulled over to the curb. He had hoped he wouldn't need to use the hypodermic, but it was ready against the moment when he must.

This was guesswork, of course. He couldn't be sure the android mechanisms would respond to drugs meant for the human blood stream. But the chances were they would, at least temporarily. The android was keyed to as close a likeness to humanity as possible. Its reflexes were patterned upon the human. Cut it and it bled. Decapitate it and respiration ceased, circulation stopped. Very well, then, drug it and for a while it should sleep. . . .

Court slept.

Only a body made of metal under the flesh could have stumbled in the semblance of a walk, half carried, half conscious, with that heavy a shot of sedative in its synthetic veins. Bradley guided the creature up the steps to the Wallinger house. He was not wearing his mask now. Everything must stand or fall by this single trial. If he failed now, hiding his identity would be of no use to him.

The small girl answered the door.

"Daddy's next door," she said, looking at the drugged and stumbling Court with interest and no alarm. "He'll be back in a minute. Won't you come in?"

She issued the invitation with all the aplomb of one newly learned in the social graces, but it was clear that curiosity and not hospitality had prompted the words. It was clear, too, that she was so unacquainted with danger that a situation like this roused no fear in her mind.

Bradley guided his burden down the hall and into the library. On the sofa against the wall the kitten lay bonelessly asleep. Bradley eased the drugged android down onto the cushions, gently tipping the cat off to the floor. Such is the complexity of the mind that even in this intent moment it occurred to him that in a machine world the cat and the cushion would probably be indistinguishable, one from another. Only a human, and a truly mature human, would be incapable of handling any small living thing roughly. The cat yawned, woke, found itself on the floor and in the presence of two strangers, and instantly streaked for the door. Its interested ears presently reappeared around the corner.

Above them, after a moment, was seen the shy but curious face of the smallest Wallinger. Bradley made an effort and remembered his name.

"Hello, Jerry," he called, settling Court on the sofa. "Is your father back yet?"

There was no reply from the child, but the little girl came in an instant later, soon enough to answer the question. She was pushing her reluctant brother before her.

"I called Daddy," she volunteered. "He'll be right over. What's the matter with — him?"

"He had a — a little accident. He'll be all right."

She considered Court with unself-conscious intentness. Court was emerging from the drug. He turned his head restlessly on the cushions, murmuring thickly. The boy, the girl and the kitten regarded him from the door, an almost terrifying remoteness in their gaze. It was obvious that to none of the three did real sympathy mean a thing yet. They could not identify themselves with adults or with suffering. All three had the cold curiosity of young animals in their eyes.

And why should they identify themselves with an android? Bradley felt the question click into place in his mind and a flash of memory illumined the thought. Children. Children, who see too clearly to be deceived by an android race. Children, without perspective and therefore without the preconceived prejudices that had blinded adults to this terrifying intrusion upon the world of humans.

Children should know the truth.

"Sue — isn't your name Sue? Listen. I want you to tell me something very important. I — I want your opinion." Bradley groped desperately among his memories of the seven-year-old mentality. Self-centered, scatterbrained,

eager for praise, interested only in their own activities except for the briefest of excursions into the outer world. If he could only flatter her enough to hold her interest. . . .

"Sue, this is something nobody but you could tell me. I want to see how much you know about — about —" He paused again. "Well, now, look. You know there are —" How could he put it? How could he ask her if she had noticed the androids among the adults whom she knew? Had she, indeed, ever seen one before? On her answer very much would depend, then, for if she did know the truth, then there must be many more of them than Bradley had guessed. If even a sheltered child knew. . . .

"Sue, you know about people like — *him*?" He gestured toward the restless android. "You know there are — two kinds of men in the world?" He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

Wariness came into her eyes. You could never tell when an adult was making fun of you, her look said.

"No, I'm serious. I don't suppose — I just want to know if *you* know. Not all children can tell the difference, and I —"

"Oh, all the kids know *that*." Contempt was in her voice.

"Know — what?"

"About them."

Bradley drew a deep breath. *All the kids know about them.* . . .

"Does your father know?" His voice sounded thin in his own ears.

She gave him another of those wary glances that watched to see if he were deriding her. Evidently reassured, she laughed shortly.

"Well, I guess he does. Doesn't everybody?"

The room swam a little before Bradley's eyes. So many of them, so many more than he had ever dreamed. . . .

"But the other kind," he heard himself saying almost pleadingly. "The *other* kind of men! How many —"

There were voices in the hall. Wallinger's, and another's, deep and heavy.

"In here, Officer," Wallinger was saying. "Right in here! Hurry!"

"How many in the world?" Sue finished Bradley's question for him. And she laughed. "We learned it in school, but I don't remember. I can tell you how many of the real kind of men in this room, though. One! One!"

"Will you tell your father that?" Bradley demanded in an agony of haste. "When he comes in, will you tell him there's only one of the *real* kind of man in here? Sue, will you —"

"Susan, get back!" Wallinger was in the doorway. That grey look made his face old as he scanned the children for signs of visible harm. Behind him a uniformed man loomed, red-faced, looking into the room with grim alertness, ready for anything.

There was a little silence.

Then Court, on the sofa, groaned softly and struggled to sit up. Wallinger hurried across the room to help.

"What have you done to him?" he demanded of Bradley. "You crazy fool, how far have you gone?"

"He's all right," Bradley stammered. "He's — you can't hurt *them*!"

Wallinger regarded him above Court's head.

"So that's what you look like," he said. "I knew you from across the street, even without your mask, but your face, of course — Will you tell us your name?"

"Bradley." He said it defiantly. "James Philips Bradley." The time for anonymity had passed. He hadn't expected the policeman to be here — it would be harder to explain in that large, disbelieving presence — but if Sue repeated what she had just told him, maybe he could convince them yet.

"Ask your daughter about *them*," he said urgently. "She knows. Wallinger, I tell you, she knows! Remember, I warned you about the children? I said *they* couldn't hope to deceive children? Sue says all of them know —"

"I'd better warn you, Bradley, Sue's got a wild imagination. I don't know what fables she's been telling you, but — Officer, hadn't you better —"

"Wait!" This wasn't going as he had planned at all. He threw all the persuasion he could summon up into his voice. "You promised to give me a hearing, Wallinger. Don't you remember, you promised? I know I had a gun then, but please — give me just a minute to tell you what I know. This man's one of *them*." He paused, running his tongue across dry lips. Wallinger looked so disbelieving. . . . "He isn't hurt. I told you I'd bring proof, and there it is. This man. I had to get him here the only way I could. I tell you, you can't hurt *them*! Under the skin he's nothing but wires and metal. I can prove it! I —"

He broke off, feeling the policeman's hands laid on his arms lightly, holding them down. Wallinger's face showed pity and horror. It was no use. He should have managed to make some incision in Court's synthetic skin before they came. Of course they wouldn't let him do it now. To them he was a madman, raving, eager to slash an innocent victim in proof of a madman's dream.

"Now, you just calm down, young man," the policeman rumbled soothingly behind him. "We'll take a little walk in the fresh air, and —"

"No! Wait!" Bradley's voice sounded wild even to himself. He choked back the protest, gathering himself for one tremendous last effort at the proof he had come so near to reaching.

Court watched him, lens-eyed, under lowered brows. Somewhere in that cold, inhuman body the cold inhuman brain ticked on remorselessly, not even amused at his defeat, for how could a machine know what it was like to laugh?

A machine — and so near, so near! Only a few feet of space separated them,

and a fraction of an inch of synthetic skin hiding the mechanisms of the android body.

"Wait!" he said again, and he twisted around to Wallinger, trying with every ounce of energy that remained in him to project his own conviction past the barrier of prejudice that blinded the adults in this room. "Wallinger, listen! After I've gone, will you talk to your little girl? Will you give me that much chance to prove myself? She knows! It isn't imagination! All the children know. Do you think *you're* safe, once Court gets out of here? They won't trust you. They can't. They'll be afraid you might wake in the night and suddenly realize the truth. Think of your daughter, Wallinger! Court's listening. He knows she recognized him. Can you take the chance with *her* life, Wallinger? Risk your own if you want to, but think of Sue!"

A flicker of the first uneasiness Bradley had seen moved across Wallinger's face. The policeman's hands were a little slack on Bradley's arms. He shrugged impatiently, and the momentary doubt on the physicist's face must have conveyed something to the officer, or perhaps it was the desperate conviction in Bradley's voice. He made the most of his moment.

"Think of Sue!" he went on. "Court won't dare make a move — but you don't know how many others there are. You don't know! You can't even guess! Maybe the ones like Court are the real failures — the ones so imperfect they give themselves away. I think they've made others, so nearly human you'd never guess. Those are the dangerous ones, Wallinger! If there's even one of them, it will know it can't be safe until you're dead. I've told you too much to —"

"All right, Officer," Wallinger said, with a little sigh. "I'm sorry, Bradley, but you see how it is."

Bradley's eyes went back to Court. The android sat motionless on the sofa, a thing of wheels and wiring as safe behind its make-believe flesh as if it wore a coat of mail. All human laws safeguarded human flesh. They held it so sacrosanct that now they were betraying it into the iron fingers of the enemy. If only these men would let him slash once with a knife at that soft, deceptive covering which was not flesh at all. . . .

Suddenly Bradley laughed.

Even the robot started a little at the sound, and the policeman made a growling noise in his throat, clearly thinking this the first ravings of a maniacal fit. But Bradley had his answer. He knew at last how he could convince even Wallinger.

"That automobile accident!" The car had been like a bludgeon in his hands. He knew — he remembered. A man can tell whether his blow has grazed the enemy or gone home. Until now it hadn't mattered. There had been too much else to deal with. But Court, pinned between car and truck wall, had not

escaped unscathed. He fell as a man would fall, but he sat now as no man could possibly sit, upright, breathing easily. . . .

Bradley remembered very clearly the feel of rib-structure giving, the sound of metal bending harshly where there should have been no metal. No man could sit like that, once a car had ground him against the wall as Bradley's car had ground Arthur Court.

He moved so suddenly the policeman's hands slipped from his arms. He was across the room in one leap, and tearing at Court's jacket before even the android had guessed what he intended.

The officer groaned and was upon him in a ponderous bound so fast that the heavy blue-coated body hurled Bradley aside with scarcely a half-second to spare. But Bradley had won his second. His hands were clenched in coat and shirt when the policeman's weight carried them both sidewise, and the cloth ripped in his grasp.

Court's short cape flared wide with the sudden defensive motion he made. The jacket and the shirt beneath opened and for one timeless moment there was no sound in the room, not even the drawing of breath. It seemed to Bradley that his heart itself paused with his breathing, for until this instant of the final test, he could not have been sure. . . .

There was the tanned chest, smooth with android skin. But the mark of the car-grille was upon it, smashing in the android ribs. Bradley had heard the metal scream as it gave before his blow. Now he saw it. Now he saw the gleaming framework of steel where no human chest ever bore steel, and within it a jumble of interlacing wires, and small, transparent tubes through which red fluid coursed. . . .

He saw the android brain.

Deep inside, behind walls of bent steel ribbing, a small, bright, pulsing thing lay. A continuous twinkling beat outward from it, uncannily illuminating the chest-cavern of the robot from within, so that the bright steel ribs caught points of light from that illumination, and wherever the transparent veins crossed before it the light turned glowing crimson as it shone through the blood. The fluid ran faster where the brilliance touched it, bubbles racing through the tubes. The thing might be heart and brain alike, an inward lamp burning in the broken shelter of the android chest.

Bradley did not even pause to reason. What he did was pure reflex. The incredible sight paralyzed the policeman for that one crucial second, but it galvanized Bradley to action.

He lunged forward, hands outstretched, and with one circling smash of his fist he struck the shining thing from its cradle.

There was an unbelievable instant when he saw his own hand deep in the hollow chest of the machine, saw the reflections of his blow moving in minia-

ture in the polished ribs, saw his knuckles bathed in the tiny crimson glow of that inner light shining through transparent veins.

And then the light went out.

There was a crackle like crystal shattering. There was a sound more felt along the nerves than heard, of high, rapid humming that droned and ceased. And Arthur Court was no longer either man or android. He was not even machine.

The man-shaped thing in man's clothing pitched forward all in one piece, like metal moving, and fell solidly to the carpet, an effigy that could never conceivably have breathed or lived or spoken. . . .

Bradley got shakily to his feet. The policeman still sprawled on the floor, staring, making no move to rise. The face that had been so ruddy was grey-white, and the colorless mouth opened and closed soundlessly, trying in vain to put the incredible into words. Bradley wanted insanely to laugh. Not even the pure human organism, he thought, functioned very efficiently in the face of shock like this.

It was Wallinger who moved first. Bradley had one glimpse of the physicist's face, drained of all color, lined and rigid with horror. But the man was moving capably enough. At least, his limbs obeyed him. He circled Bradley with scarcely a glance, skirted the collapsed metal thing on the floor, and bent above the policeman. . . .

He lifted one arm sharply, bent at the elbow, and struck the officer a hard, expert blow with the edge of his palm. The man collapsed without a sound.

Above him, Wallinger stared into Bradley's eyes.

"You're — on *their* side?" Bradley forced the words out painfully, wondering why they came in a whisper. He did not dare take his eyes from Wallinger's, but his mind had stopped functioning altogether and he scarcely knew why he stared, or why this thundering of sudden terror in his chest made breathing so hard. "You're working with — *them*?"

Wallinger straightened slowly, letting the blue-coated body slide to the floor. His gaze broke from Bradley's and he looked across the room toward the hall door. With a great effort Bradley followed the look.

The children still watched. Without alarm, interested, not comprehending, they watched as they might have watched a film at the neighborhood movie.

"Sue — Jerry — upstairs!" Wallinger's voice was firm, almost normal. "Move! And shut the door behind you."

The sound of its closing seemed to release some of the tension in the man, for he let his breath out a little and his shoulders sagged. He met Bradley's eyes, grimaced, started to speak, and then thought better of it.

"Tell me!" Bradley's voice was stronger, insistence growing in it now. "*Which side are you on?*"

Wallinger did not want to answer. When he spoke, it was indirectly.

"It's not on record, Bradley," he said, almost with diffidence, "but I think you ought to know — the children aren't mine."

"Not —"

"I adopted them."

"But — but then —" There was no need to finish the protest. Bradley had chosen this man for his confidences from the first, chiefly because he could be sure that here was one influential person of proved humanity — the father of other humans. No sterile machine.

Wallinger shrugged gently. He glanced down at the heavily breathing man at his feet.

"I had to do that," he said. "Now I'll have to think of some way to make him believe he dreamed all this. I hate to do it, but I can't think of any other way right now except —" He glanced at his desk. "Maybe this."

There was a bottle of whiskey in the top drawer. Moving with deliberate haste, he opened it, poured two generous portions into little metal cups from the same drawer, and then deliberately upended the bottle above the groaning policeman's chest.

Bradley reached for a cup, holding it in both hands to steady his shaking. The strong, burning liquid stuck in his throat for a moment, then spread downward with a grateful, soothing warmth.

"The story mustn't get out, you know," Wallinger said above his own cup.

"But I don't — you mean you knew, all along? Wallinger, *what are you?*"

"The story mustn't get out," Wallinger went on calmly, ignoring the question. "Of course I knew. But we've got to keep it quiet."

"Are you on their side or ours?" Bradley's throat felt raw with the harshness of his voice. "Are you a man or — or —"

"If *they* find out how much we know about them, don't you suppose they'll act? Somehow we've got to dispose of the Court mechanism, in a way they won't be able to trace. I'm sorry for this officer here, but he'll have to think he was drunk and dreamed what we all saw. I tell you, Bradley, we don't dare let them suspect we know!"

Bradley let his emptied cup fall to the carpet. He walked forward six deliberate steps and put his hands heavily on Wallinger's shoulders. The flesh felt like flesh; the bone beneath was firm and hard. It could be bone — or steel. You couldn't tell by looking at them. But surely you could tell by the way they behaved, by their reactions, by their thinking. By the things they put first in value —

"The children!" Bradley said urgently. "No — machine — would think first of children the way you do. Would it, Wallinger? Even though they aren't

yours, you put them first. Why did you tell me they weren't yours? Did you mean — *what* did you mean, Wallinger? How do you really feel about those children?"

Wallinger smiled. His voice was mild and amused.

"'Hath not an android eyes?' " he paraphrased with gentle irony. "'Hath not an android hands — senses — affections? If you prick us, do we not bleed?'"

Bradley let his grip fall. He stepped back, staring as if he could pierce the too-perfect illusion of flesh and see whether bone or steel lay behind that gently smiling face.

"There was one android made," Wallinger said, "in the perfect replica of the human. Everything that went into its mental and physical make-up was as close as their finest arts could come to human thinking." He paused, grimaced. "Well," he said, "they came too close. They succeeded. I — I'm rather afraid they made — a man."

"You?"

Wallinger smiled.

"I don't believe it," Bradley told him wildly. "It isn't possible."

Wallinger gave him a speculative look. Then he opened another drawer, fumbled in it and pulled out a penknife. He flicked the blade open and with almost the same gesture drew its edge across the back of his hand.

Bradley caught his breath. He didn't want to look, but he could not stop himself.

Wallinger, still smiling, held out his arm.

"I can stop the bleeding, you see," he said. "That's how Court kept from giving his injury away, at first. We can always control that, if necessary."

There was no blood. The edges of the synthetic skin were clean and smooth as pale rubber, and beneath them steel tendons moved, transparant tubes as fine as hairs pulsed with bubbling red liquid. It was a hand of living metal. It was an android's hand.

"Satisfied?" Wallinger withdrew his arm. With the other hand he smoothed the cut flesh together. It sealed like wax and was whole again as Bradley still gasped his incredulous protest.

"Here, you'd better have another drink," Wallinger's amused voice seemed to be saying from a long way off, above the ringing in his ears.

"But — why didn't you tell me? Are you sure they don't suspect? Can we really get away with this — with destroying Court? I don't understand, Wallinger! If you're really an android, and working against androids — what are we going to do? There must be ways they have to check up on what happens to every separate one. What about Court? Wallinger, if this is all true, why didn't you help me against Court? You could have —"

"Hold on! One question at a time!" Wallinger's voice broke into the almost hysterical babble of Bradley's released tension. "First, about Court. I couldn't work against him, Bradley. I'm a very imperfect mechanism myself, considering what I was made for, and they'll destroy me if they find out what I'm about to do — but there are rules even I have to follow. They're built in. I can't injure another android. I *can't*. That's the way we're made. I couldn't any more than you could stop your blood from flowing if you were cut. I may be an imperfect machine, but I'm not that imperfect."

"Then what shall we do? Why not call the police — the newspapers —"

"No! Don't talk like a fool. Once the androids know their secret's out, don't you think they'll strike hard and fast? They've got their plans all laid. Don't make any mistake about that. Our only hope's to work in the dark until we have plans too."

"You could have told me sooner," Bradley said with reproach. "When I first came —"

"How could I have told you? I didn't know who you were, in that mask. You could have been from *them*, for all I knew. And today — I didn't dare speak in front of Court. I had to act like a normal man — call the police — show the right reactions. It wasn't until you attacked Court that I was sure about you."

"Okay. We're wasting time, then. They'll know Court's — smashed. They'll look for him. What are we going to do?"

"I wish I knew." Wallinger got up abruptly and began to pace up and down the room with quick, nervous steps. It was incredible that wires, not nerves, steel springs instead of muscles, activated that perfect replica of a human. Even in his mind, the likeness was so uncannily perfect. . . .

"Full circle," Bradley thought, with confused triumph. "If this is true, they've overreached themselves. They've made such a perfect android — *if this is true* — that it'll mean the finish of their whole kind. They can't let him live. Once they suspect him, they'll have to destroy him. It works both ways. When the first successful android was made, the human race was doomed — until the first successful humanoid was produced by the robots. He's as dangerous to them as they are to us." He looked at Wallinger thoughtfully.

"How do you feel about them — about the androids?" he asked.

"Confused." Wallinger's smile was wry. "This has been coming on for a long while, of course, but I've never had to take definite sides until now. I don't know how I feel. Lost. Not really belonging to either side. I suppose I feel exactly as you do about the human race — part of it. I *am* part of it. They made me too well. But how many humans would accept me if they knew the truth? And I could never go back to the androids once I've failed them. I don't belong on either side. I only know that I —" He paused, grinned suddenly and said

with deliberation, "I speak as a man, I think as a man, I have put away android things. You see? When I try to tell you how a humanoid feels I put it automatically into Shakespeare's words, or St. Paul's. Men's words, telling how men feel. But I still see through a glass —" He touched his eyes, which Bradley knew were lenses, not flesh. "I see through glass, darkly. . . ."

There was a long silence between them after that.

"Well," Wallinger said heavily, "it's up to me. I know them. You don't."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go home. Leave me your number, and stay there until I call you. Okay? I have an idea about getting rid of — this —" He gestured at the man-shaped heap of wires and steel and flesh on the floor. "I've got to do that alone. Afterward, tomorrow, I'll phone you. But whatever you do, Bradley, don't leave your place until you hear from me. Don't even open the door! And above everything, don't go spreading the word about what's happened. If you do —"

"If I do, I'll wind up in a padded cell," Bradley said. "I know. Nobody would believe me except the androids, and they'd be only too glad to get me committed. Don't worry, I'll keep my mouth shut. But don't make me wait too long, will you?"

"I'll do my best," Wallinger promised.

Bradley glanced up as he descended the steps toward the street. In the hall the two children stood watching him. The girl was smiling. She pointed to her brother and then waved at Bradley, nodding. He had a curious feeling that she was trying to convey something. But it was a child's knowledge behind her smile, esoteric, not communicable to the adult mind.

Bradley waved in answer and went on down the path.

When he woke it was still dark. He lay quiet, wondering for a confused instant where he was and why he should be awake. He could not see his watch, but there was a pre-dawn stillness in the air.

Then he saw the light beneath the door and heard the voices talking quietly beyond it. He lay in his own bed, and that was his own living room, but why the light burned and whose the voices were he could not guess.

He got up and went barefooted across the floor. He opened the door a narrow crack. There were five men in the room beyond. They sat comfortably there, talking softly, like men waiting for something — or someone.

The first face he saw was Arthur Court's.

"All right, Bradley," the Director's familiar voice said in the very instant of recognition. "All right, it's time now. Come in."

Bradley never knew whether the android could actually see through the spinning atoms of the door, or whether some sound had given his own presence away. It didn't matter. He was beyond help now. He and the race of man. . . .

He crossed the threshold quietly and closed the door behind him. He stood there looking at the five men in his living room. They sat perfectly motionless, their eyes on his. None of them had been smoking. None of them moved. None of them lived by the tight-strung nerves of imperfect humans, so they had no need for aimless motions. None of them was a man.

When the silence had reached a pitch just this side of being unbearable, Bradley spoke.

"What happened to Wallinger?" he asked.

"Nothing." Court smiled at him.

"Nothing? But —"

"We needed a little extra time. Wallinger got it for us. That's all."

A sudden upward flood of bitterness made Bradley's vision swim for an instant. How easily Wallinger had deceived him, then! How pitifully gullible was the illogical human brain before the resourceful logic of the machine! Wallinger had known exactly what lines of reasoning would most certainly soothe Bradley's fears to rest. And the quiet machine mind had not even lied when it spoke, for how can a machine deal in falsehood or in truth?

They needed time — for what? To repair the shattered Court, to assemble their forces, to close in. Most of all, they had needed to keep Bradley silent while they went about the business of destroying him. How? What would they do? Was there any way at all, even in this last moment, for him to outwit them? He thought there was not, but a desperate cunning made him say,

"All right, I can't stop you. Do what you like. But please, Court — please! We've worked together — you can't blame me for doing what I had to do, but we've worked together a long while. Do me one favor. Please don't let them put me in an insane asylum! It would be better if you shot me — safer for you! Anything's better than the asylum!"

He almost choked when he had to say it. No man should plead with a machine. But if it were for man's final salvation — yes, he could bring himself even to beg favors of this thing made of steel and wire. And this was his last weapon against them, this peculiarly inverted human logic which was part of folk-lore. The logic that saved Br'er Rabbit from his foes. *Don't throw me into the briar-patch!* If they committed him to an asylum, at least he would still be alive, at least he could still work against them. And the children knew. In time, someone would listen, if he could only stay alive.

"Please, Court, anything but the asylum!"

The android smiled. It was curious to think of the intricate little springs and wiring that drew up his face when it moved. It was appalling to realize that when Arthur Court spoke, the mind which dictated the words lay in the gleaming hollow of his chest where something made up of lights that twinkled was the essence and the soul of the machine.

"Forget it, Bradley," the android said. "It won't be the asylum."

Bradley braced himself against the door. There was one thing left to do, then. He had tried cunning, and cunning failed. He had tried everything a man could try, and everywhere he had failed.

But they should not kill him. That final choice still lay in his own hands, and he would not submit to this last indignity. If he must die, let it be of his own will, freely.

He measured the distance to the window, gathering his muscles for this final leap. There was so much he would never know, he thought despairingly. The fate of the race of man itself, for which he had fought so vainly, was beyond his knowledge now. He thought of Wallinger, so nearly human in his reactions, so convincingly human in his speech, despite this final betrayal. Perhaps, after all, Wallinger had spoken more truthfully than he knew. Perhaps they *had* made an android too nearly human. . . .

But it was too late. Wallinger's voice came back to his mind briefly, and the magnificent words of St. Paul's that begin, "Though I speak with the tongues of men. . . ." Wallinger had spoken with the tongue of man, but for man's destruction. There was something terrifying in the aptness of that chapter from Corinthians.

"Whether there be tongues, they shall cease, whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away —"

Blindly he thrust himself away from the door in a last desperate leap. The nearest android moved too late to intercept him. He swept the curtains aside, drew back his fist and shattered the glass that was all that parted them from the humming street twenty stories down. Man's streets, which would so soon be man's no longer. . . .

He lunged through the glass. He hung vertiginously over the spinning depths below. He could see the wall of the building straight downward beneath his own knees, its lines swooping dizzily inward as he swayed.

It was Arthur Court's voice that halted him.

"Wait, Bradley, wait! Not until you hear the truth!"

It stopped him on the brink, and beyond the brink, of the window. He would have thought no power on earth could reverse the terrible suction of gravity that had already laid hands on him and was swinging him out and down with the very swing of the earth's rotation. But he found he was stronger than he knew. . . .

Court's face was stern. Bradley stood braced against the shattered window, his knees strengthless, his head still spinning with the pull of the street below. Blank-eyed, he stared at the android across the room.

"You fool!" Arthur Court said. "Are you trying to ruin us all?"

"But I —"

"You still don't understand? You still don't know Wallinger told you the truth?"

"Wallinger — told the truth?"

"Yes — in part. Think, Bradley, think!"

He could not think. His mind had suffered too many stunning shocks for reasoning now. But he did not need to think. He had had the clue many hours ago, and until this moment he had not known. The memory came back and he heard Sue Wallinger's small voice speaking again in the quiet library. He saw her at the door as he went down the path. He remembered her gesture and her smile.

"I can tell you how many of the real kind of men in this room — one, one!"

And she had smiled at him and touched her brother's shoulder.

She had not meant anyone in that room except the human male child. He had asked about men — she touched her brother's shoulder. All the children knew — all the androids knew. Only the humans were blind — and James Bradley.

"Look down," Court's voice said, almost gently.

Bradley looked. There was blood on the floor. He felt a stinging in his hand, and dully lifted his arm to see why. He had put his fist through the window. It had not mattered, then, whether he slashed his own flesh or not. It didn't matter now. . . .

He saw, without surprise, without shock, only with a numbness of the mind, how the edges of his skin had parted cleanly. The slow blood welled into his cupped palm. He looked down with utter silence at the uncovered tendons of his hand, gleaming mirror-bright from every steel surface. He saw the fine, tiny, tight-curved springs draw up in perfect response when he clenched his fingers.

"We made you too well," Arthur Court was saying. "We made you so well you're imperfect. You must be changed, Bradley. No android must be able to attack his own kind. Our survival depends on that law. Do you see now what Wallinger was trying to tell you? The danger of a perfect humanoid is too great. And you're perfect. Answer me, Bradley — do you understand what I'm saying?"

He could not answer. He knew the truth now, but he felt exactly as he had felt before. He was a man still. His whole loyalty lay with the human kind of which he was so merciless a duplicate. Until they made that change that would alter his imperfection, he must continue this fight he had taken up for man against machine. Until they changed him from imperfect android to the perfection of the race of the machine. . . .

When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away.

St. Paul had put it all with such terrifying clarity. *Though I speak with the tongues of men . . . I am become as sounding brass. . . .*

"We don't want to waste you, Bradley," Court said. "You're a fine machine. We need you badly. There's so much work to be done, and we need your help."

"No," Bradley said. "No."

And this time they could not stop him.

He didn't pause to brush the curtain aside, and the glass was already shattered. He saw again the inward-leaning wall that dropped straight for twenty stories toward the street. His knee was on the sill.

Down there would be men to see. Down there in the street they must see and they might perhaps understand the meaning of this paradox that was the android body, the steel ribs and the intricate wiring by which this flesh-clad body once had moved. . . .

Somewhere deep in his chest the little sparkling thing that at this moment thought as a man thinks knew an instant's wonder. "Is this the way a man feels who gives up his life for his own kind?" Bradley asked himself the futile question. "Or am I moving only as a machine moves, in blind obedience to the orders that were given me when I was made? They must have set me the problem of behaving like a human. And this is a thing men do . . . not machines. Never machines."

He leaned out. The mighty drag of the earth's swing pulled him across the sill. It was not much he could do for the race in whose image he had been made, but it was all he could give them. Perhaps it might help. Perhaps it would not. That was something he would never know.

The robots crowded to the sill to watch him fall.

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Though witches are among the commonest of all stock figures in fantasy fiction (and fact), we can recall only a handful of literary attempts to investigate The Witch as an individual character, to probe the psychological reasons for her witchcraft, to learn how it feels to be a witch. This handful includes Sylvia Townsend Warner's LOLLY WILLOWES, Esther Forbes's A MIRROR FOR WITCHES, the 1621 play THE WITCH OF EDMONTON by Dekker, Ford and Rowley, and Stevenson's study of the male witch or warlock in the Todd Lapraik episode of DAVID BALFOUR. Now this select company may welcome the young English writer Dorothy K. Haynes. Despite its title and dustjacket, her volume of collected short stories, THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER A WITCH (London: Methuen, 1949), consists chiefly of the most realistic slice-of-life fiction; but in two cases she applies her keenly realistic perception to the problems of witchcraft. The title story (like the Forbes novel just mentioned) handles the theme from a non-supernatural historical viewpoint, and admirably. But the brief tale which closes the volume, and which we now bring you in its first American appearance, is a masterpiece of supernatural insight, a vivid and penetrating glimpse of what it is like to become a witch, a story which discloses fresh depths and beauties on each rereading.

A Story at Bedtime

by DOROTHY K. HAYNES

THE WITCH lay long in the mornings, drowsing and mumbling till the sun was well up; but at night, wakeful, she called her two children, and made them leave their play to listen.

There was a horror on them as they obeyed her. Reluctance clutched at their ankles and stiffened their knees, so that they could not squat. But soon, with their mother's black skirts tented above their heads and her hands heavy on their shoulders, they grew absorbed in her story. She spoke about curious things, voyages in cold air, journeys under the moon, and the harry and chase of hunted animals. It was painful to listen, though they did not know why. The idea of it was worse than the reality, the dread like the slow drag of a broken limb. When it was all over, the children never spoke of it, but they clung together tightly in the night.

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They never saw their mother going out. Hand in hand under the blankets, they heard the tick and settle of embers, the squeak of a mouse in the wainscot, and the deep bellows-breathing of the woman in the other bed. Their own breath was soft and furtive, a rustle quickly stifled. "Are you awake?" one hand would signal, and the nails and fingers would answer back. It did not matter so long as they slept or woke together. The terror would come if one were to wake alone, and hear the scuffle of their mother getting ready to leave them; or to see the window lit with the moon, and between it and the bed, the rearing shape of a woman become infernal.

In the day, it was easy to laugh at these things. They did not believe the stories then. They knew that their mother was only an old woman who did odd favours for the neighbours, when they paid her well enough. The stories were only bedtime stories, told out of kindness. All children liked a story at bedtime, but there was a compulsion, a frightening fascination about these. The fear began in the afternoon, and went on increasing till the dreadful moment when they were called to her knee. The beginning and end of the stories were the worst; the climax found them anaesthetised to horror.

The girl stood quite still, her eyes on the coloured tray above the mantelshelf. Her brother was playing with a ball, throwing it and catching it, bounce, bounce against the wall. The dun plaster rang with the thud of it, as he counted up and up, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, a *hundred*.

She was playing with a piece of string, a short, thick piece she had picked up and knotted. The knots had taken her a long time to perfect, twisting one end round and over the other, pulling it tight and tying it again. Hidden in her pocket, her hands caressed the tow, as she looked at the tray.

The enamel in one corner was chipped. Staring at it till her eyes fused in dizziness, the chip looked like a gull flying. Suddenly, without knowing why, she untied one of the knots in her string. The gull flew heavily, staggering and dipping. The girl woke to herself only when her mother took the string out of her hand. No word passed between them, no rebuke, no recognition of what had happened. The boy's ball struck the tray and knocked it askew as he ran to the window, where the trees were lashing and bending with the force of a gale that was already past. A chimney pot lay in the garden, smashed, and the flowers were flat and desolate. The girl said nothing. For a moment, she had seen the world as something small and insignificant. Houses, towns and rivers were markings on a map, people mere specks. She almost laughed at her brother's puny excitement over the wind. She and her mother were the only people with any stature at all.

After that, she knew that the evening stories were true. They did not frighten her now. The thrill with which she listened was a thrill of anticipation,

In bed, she answered her brother's signals with the same faithful pressure, and dropped into sleep without hearing sound or sign from her mother. She knew that soon the time would come when she would know more.

"Are you awake?"

"Yes." Her fingers pressed a reply. On the pillow beside her, her brother's head tilted sideways, and his eyes rolled backwards into sleep. Outside, the moon was as bright as morning.

She laughed as she left the bed. Already her mother had gone. The old face was still and haggard on the pillow, the bedclothes hummocked over her knees. She looked at her own bed, and saw herself, seeming asleep, a protecting hand over her brother's chest. She laughed again. Her power came to her unasked, effortless. She had never done this before, but she knew well what she would have to do. A witch is not always a witch by choice; a poor soul cannot always help herself; but there is delight in obeying one's nature, and if Nature is evil, who is to blame? Who suffers? Damnation is a long way off, its threat incomprehensible when life is full. The moon is bright; hurry.

Her thin legs, straight as tallow candles, dangled over the edge of the broomstick. There was no movement in the air, no flirt and whirr, no beat of bat or bird wing. She was all alone, moving quieter than an arrow. The earth went dark except where the rivers ran like steel veins, and ponds lay under the moon like clots of mercury. Poised in emptiness, she knew neither speed nor motion.

There is neither beginning nor end to such journeys. She understood now the inconsequential jumps of her mother's narratives — "There was a hall, and we ate food, and drank wine, while those things that I whispered to you about were going on outside . . . and then the cowshed, and everything quiet, with Babsy, the bonny hare, sucking the cow dry, squeezing the udder like a sponge. . . ." She understood now. There was no surprise, no query as to direction or destination. She would know the place when she came to it.

Rocks rose sheer and black from the water. High above her the moon canted to one side, and great green rays swept down like sun in a cathedral. Here now was the horror of her mother's stories, the sense of dread, the trilling of every nerve in a bleak nightmare. And here, too, was her mother, sailing by in an eggshell, beckoning like a black spider scrabbling on the wall.

Inside the shell it was as cold as marble. Quiet, not talking, they drifted under the black hang of the cliff. The open sea beyond shone like a bright rod, but here the water was as smooth and dark as the bottom of a bottle. The shadows shifted as they waited, and the moon lit up fresh chasms in the rock, shining on slaty ledges where seabirds huddled in hundreds. Then a ship came sailing over the silver rod of the surf, into the quietness of the crag-ringed pool.

The witch took a piece of string from her pocket. She untied one knot. A

wind got up, and ruffled the wings of the gulls. The ship bounded and lunged, and the waves of the pool slapped new tidemarks on the crags. She untied a second knot. The gale howled, the air chilled to ice, and all the seabirds rose and screamed in wild discord. She untied the third knot. The din in the air was like yelling of demons. The water boiled white with foam, and under the black base of the cliff, the eggshell heaved and splintered. There was a horrid grinding, a cry above the roar of wind and storm, and the ship went down, plunging and ploughing in the green glare of the moon. The air settled to stillness, the birds flew back to their ledges. The eggshell boat paddled placidly through the bounding swell.

The witch told about it next evening. Crouched at her feet, the children sat entranced. The boy saw it all with a sickly vividness — the ship going howling to the bottom, the waves seething down, down to quietness, the horrible shut-in loneliness of the place. His mouth was open, his hand groped for his sister's.

The girl interrupted in the heat of the tale. "And we came home fast, because soon it would be morning. And when we got into the house ——"

"We?" he asked.

"I forgot," she said, and grinned at him.

He grinned back, his lips stiff with bravery, but his grin was only a wavering gap in a mask of doubt. Creeping into bed, under the bizarre map of the patchwork quilt, he questioned her, half frivolous, half pleading.

"You *don't* go out at night, do you? Never?"

"You'd wonder," she said, licking away a smile with a crooked tongue.

"But you don't? Don't tease. Tell me!"

"Silly! You'd feel if I went out. Don't you feel me there all the time?"

He looked at her, straight as a taper in her nightgown. She was his sister, and he was safe with her. They snuggled together, hand signalling to hand in the old unspoken language. The fire winked wan in a bed of ashes, the cauldron was cold in a casing of soot. Crumbs had burrowed in the cracks of the floor, and the mice who salvaged them left their dirt in the corners.

He woke in the purple dark, long after midnight. The kitchen was full of soft breathing, the sound of women in slumber. Only his own breathing was harsh, as if he had been running from a nightmare. Beside him in the bed, heavy and immovable, the girl lay like a figure of wax. His hand groped over her breast, down her side, till he reached the cold rigidity of her fingers. He fondled them for a long time, wondering why she did not wake, and respond to him; then, while the nightmare caught up with him, he realised that now he was quite alone.

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